

## The Edge of Treason

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# The Edge of Treason

by [Storm\\_Elf](#)

## Summary

The Black General. The bastard prince. It's a dangerous alliance in a garrison realm caught between two aggressive enemies. With a cowardly drunkard of a king on the throne, and the heir apparent more interested in whores and horse-racing, the country's safety has to depend on someone -- and Aleksander Morozova, Shadow-Summoner and Shadow King of Ravka, is all too used to responsibility falling to him. As threats close in on two frontiers, he will risk anything to protect his people, especially Grisha like himself. He'd like to find a way to maintain his country's independence with the help of the bold, brave, and brilliant second prince. But, if he has to, he'll take a different road and become history's villain again to do it.

## Notes

Prequel to Shadow and Bone.

CW: Chapter 3 contains an implicit/non-graphic sexual and physical assault of Aleksander by King Pyotr. The aftermath is addressed in the following chapters and contributes to the political plot arc. A reminder warning will be given at the start of Chapter 3.

# Chapter 1

Aleksander Morozova stood on his private terrace, watching the breeze drift across the wild flower gardens towards the lake. Some of the young squallers had got carried away in their evening classes and, in the soft tawny dawn, the weather was still settling itself, like a duck twitching droplets off her back. The dandelions had flowered and finished early this year. At each new puff of air, their shaggy white clocks were shaken free of the tenuous hold of their stems. Like the lives of the otkazat'sya they drifted away as if they had never been.

Aleksander drew the heavy blue-black brocade folds of his dressing robe closer to ward off a familiar chill that had nothing to do with the late spring air. Then, as if he were merely amusing himself, he captured a passing seed head and twirled it between his fingers.

Behind him, the thick black drapes stirred and a figure stepped out onto the marble flags.

"Making wishes?"

"I don't make wishes. I make plans."

"If you ever used your Cut on yourself, it would say General right through to your core, wouldn't it?"

His companion's voice was still sleep-slurred, languid and playful. Aleksander's jaw tightened.

"What would yours say?" he deflected. "Princeling? Privateer? Puppy?"

A hip bumped his and arms wound around his waist, a stubborn chin coming to rest on his shoulder. A chuckle huffed against his ear.

"Why, 'Nothing.'"

Aleksander relaxed. He had found, to his surprise, that now his painful youth was long past, he did not mind so much being teased, especially when the tormentor was apt in half a breath to turn his jests on himself.

"So this court makes liars of us all," he murmured, enfolding the warm hands around his midriff into his own.

Nikolai Lantsov nuzzled into his neck, mapping arteries, veins, and tendons there as though - itself a lie -- they were new territory. Aleksander shuddered against him. Strange flickers of panic pulsed through his bones, like sunlight through the branches of the trees. This, whatever it was between them, was as fleeting as the dandelion clocks. And yet, and yet, it awoke in him more than the inevitable, made him arch into Nikolai and turn to capture his mouth in a hungry kiss, as if, some impossible if, he might pour enough of himself into it that he would be able to defy the laws of nature and keep it alive.

Nikolai's hands were free of his now, twisted in his lapels, tugging him back through the curtains. Aleksander yielded, letting Nikolai's steps guide them in a practiced dance back towards the tousled black silk sheets of his enormous bed. As they crashed onto it, Aleksander's own hands delving urgently beneath the silver-blue jacquard of Nikolai's robe, the prince's mischievous laugh came again.

"Oof! I'll have someone replace the bedsprings later."

Aleksander growled, or he meant to, even to his own ears it sounded more like a snicker.

"See that you do," he hissed, nipping at the shell of Nikolai's ear. "I doubt I have you for long, so I intend that we make the most of it."

"A month at best," Nikolai groaned, his ever restless fingers curving around flesh globes, seeking out the hidden country that made Aleksander surge against him like a tsunami. "Have to...get back to...the university...before the...exams."

Not enough, never enough. Banishing the spectre of time, Aleksander crushed their lips together until only their bodies and breath and heartbeats were speaking.

Outside, on the balcony, the little dandelion seed that had fallen to the flags fluttered faintly in the breeze.

## Chapter 2

One of the most pleasing things about the youngest prince was that he listened. All his idle, cheerful chatter, how much he seemed to like the sound of his own voice, was a smokescreen for acute-eared attention. Nikolai had expressed an interest in being properly acquainted with the people and activities of the Little Palace. It was not the first time he'd seen the grounds and buildings, but he'd always come before with the King and Queen, or Vasily, visits that teetered between token politeness -- "How quaint!" the Queen always cried at the decor -- and suspicious surveillance from the King, who would peer and mutter into the rooms they were shown, "What are you up to in here, Darkling?". This time, Aleksander had agreed to take the prince on the tour they gave to adolescent Grisha, who were graduating from the children's school to join the ranks of those preparing to join the Second Army.

They started in the grounds, having slipped out to the lakeshore at day break. While the Darkling could come and go as he pleased here and answer to no one, he was well aware of the reach of the Grand Palace and that there were those among his people who might have been bribed or blackmailed to feed back information on Nikolai's whereabouts. It was no secret that the youngest prince was by far the more popular of the King's sons in the capital city and beyond, or that he had a better head for politics and military strategy. It was more prudent, for both Nikolai's safety and his own ever unstable relationship with the King, that the time they spent together seemed nothing more than a sanctioned political alliance.

*Was* nothing more. As they passed through the Summoners' pavilions, picking up the pale winding path around the woods back to the arcade, Aleksander shook his head at himself. While he could admit what had grown between them was more than a dalliance, it could not be clouded with too much emotion. It had to be an alliance. It was one with the potential to be a great deal of use for them both if their hopes and plans for Ravka's future continued to align. They kept their conversations guarded there, focused on well-acknowledged problems that they found ways to solve, sometimes splitting, sometimes attributing full credit to one another. But, as two years passed, then three, it had become increasingly apparent how much more they could achieve together, how many more of the unspoken complications and threats to the country they might tackle too -- if Nikolai had more influence, more power. If he were to have the resources of the Little Palace at his disposal, and it his. Aleksander wondered sometimes whether the long months Nikolai spent away from Os Alta were, in part, to prevent either one of them stepping over a line they then could not uncross.

"All right, what do you want to see first?" he asked, as they entered the main lobby and began to walk towards the domed hall where the Grisha clustered for meals, balls, the winter fete, and other large gatherings of the Orders.

"Show me what you'd show a Grisha," Nikolai reiterated.

"Which Order?"

"Yours."

“You’re wearing the wrong colours for that, *sobachka*.”

Nikolai glanced down at his olive-green military greatcoat.

“Should I have donned more princely regalia? Or just raided your wardrobe this morning? I don’t want the pomp and the polish you show my family, the fire-ball throwing and the sparkly lightshow, the we’re-so-humble herring and rye fare that, quite frankly, looks ridiculous against all the gold inlay and expensive tiling. Show me what’s behind the circus. I want to understand what makes Grisha who they are, what matters to Ravkans -- native or by immigration -- who are like you.”

Ravkans. Nikolai was the only *otkazat’sya* who called them -- him -- that. It stirred up a hope that he would never quite allow to die, then twirled it through him like a seed on the wind, one of many that -- even if it were real -- would not last long before it blew away. *But what if it could land, take root, and sprout? What if there was a way to direct the growth of the Lantsov line to something less flimsy than the yellow-haired, yellow-hearted crop that clung about its throne riven with diseases -- alcoholism, avarice, lust, and wrath?* There were other ways, more reasonable ways, to maintain his place in this accursed court and uphold the promises he’d made to those he’d sworn to protect. He would not gamble it all on a chance someone else had to take, even if that someone were Nikolai.

Nonetheless, he led Nikolai through the Library, maintaining an idle conversation about some of the rare books held there and those that were lost, with the prince asking endless questions about main theorists and scholars of the Small Science, then out through the opposite doors into one of the inner hallways.

“Corporalkai Quarters,” he announced, and headed towards the red lacquered doors at the end of it. This was one place he’d always kept the other royals far away from.

“Life blood red, subtle,” Nikolai teased, eyeing the darker etchings that made up an intricate patterning that, on close inspection, was made up of bodily systems, muscles, nerves, and bones. “Is the dark red-black supposed to be dried blood? The colour looks a little off to me.”

“Depends where you spill it. Surface texture and shade affects the colour too.”

“True.”

Nikolai’s voice trailed off in wonder as they began to traverse the corridors, which were crafted out of shades of marble that most closely resembled bone. Great display cases lined the walls, filled with artistic renderings of dissections and experiments, fluids magnified into geometric patterns under a microscope, and faces of the Corporalkai saints performing their last miracles.

Between the display cases were doors that opened into a variety of larger and smaller laboratories. Aleksander picked one, not quite at random, and threw it open with no pretence that it was anything other than a challenge.

“Kiska, Luka,” he said, disturbing the two postgraduate Heartrenders who were working there. “Show Prince Nikolai what you’re working on.”

Luka shot him a look of open disbelief, but Kiska simply raised her hands. There was a dead hare lying on the work-bench in front of them. Others lay dissected in pieces. As she called her power, the glassy brown eyes brightened and the limp body rolled in place, scrambled up onto its feet and hopped in a puzzled fashion across the table-top.

Nikolai raised an eyebrow.

“*Moi tsarevich*,” Luka bowed. “This is a preservation of life experiment. We’re trying to delay the period between technical death and the point of no return. We’re hoping that we can generate a liminal state where those with a fatal but otherwise non-disabling injury could fend off mortality for a time. It’s a step beyond what the Healers can do by slowing hearts and lowering temperatures. The aim is to get some wounded soldiers back from behind enemy lines under their own steam, reducing the need for complex and dangerous rescue missions while limiting the death toll.”

“If rigor has set in, it’s gone too far,” Kiska agreed, poking a hare that lay stiff on the bench beside her.

“Reanimated corpses,” Nikolai sounded both disturbed and intrigued. “Otherwise known as zombies, I believe.”

Aleksander curled his lip. “We are not in the business of making the dead walk,” he said flatly. “That would take *merzost*, which I...discourage, for the most part. This is merely an extended state of not-dying, with the intent to preserve life too easily spent on the battlefield.” He turned to Kiska and added irritably, “It didn’t occur to you that rigor would be a step too far?”

She shrugged, and he realised that she had been able to reanimate the hare, simply not to return it to life. That was not something Nikolai needed to know. His mind would move far too quickly to corpses of kings posing, glass-eyed, on thrones and puppeteered by grey eminences. While Aleksander would use every method at his disposal to protect Ravka from her enemies within or beyond her borders, Nikolai was not yet so jaded and for the most part tended to opt for more honorable means.

“Interesting premise,” Nikolai mused, sounding a lot less put-off than Aleksander had expected. “Have you explored the extent of what classes as a fatal injury that could be forestalled yet? Is there a time-frame for how long ‘life’ can be preserved before healing need take place? Does it work alongside pain-blockers so that someone with, say, a broken leg could still escape?” He cast Aleksander a calculating look. “I imagine you’ve other ideas for the application of this too. There are certain jobs that must sometimes be done where no one anticipates coming back alive.”

“True,” Aleksander allowed. The Shu had a fine line in suicide warfare, and a set of firestorm devices not unlike those of the Fjerdans, not mention the Khergud.

“Not quite what one expects when the epics bang on about death and glory,” Nikolai murmured, studying the equations that Kiska handed to him and absently petting the hare when it hopped over to sniff at him. “Five minutes isn’t much when you’re deep in enemy

territory. Fifteen would be better -- more if you can. If it's going to be done at least give the poor devils a fighting chance, otherwise it's just a protracted form of torture."

The sidelong look he shot Aleksander was decidedly more cautionary. Aleksander did not allow himself to react; he was hardly surprised that Nikolai had begun to guess at other potential applications.

"You're correct," he said. "If the intent is to minimise the death toll -- which as you will have noted is climbing at an unreasonable rate, especially on the Fold -- there is little need to keep someone alive beyond the point of death unless there is sufficient time to then administer life-saving aid." He glanced at the two Heartrenders. "Keep working."

He and Nikolai continued through the Corporalkai quarters, investigating the new treatments in the Healing Wing, better painkillers, new techniques for treating internal injuries, a startling array of antidotes for some prototype poisons that had been identified as imports from Kerch, and then went on to the Tailors' parlours.

They lost over an hour there, letting the Tailors play with their aesthetics, giving them a variety of guises fit for the spymasters, and finally turning them into a pair of princesses. It was hardly the first time Aleksander had borrowed a woman's guise, and he wore it with indifferent habit. Nikolai seemed quite taken with his.

"It's not really me," he said, peering curiously into his lined eyes and touching his curled lashes. "But what a lifesaver if it were. You can make these permanent?"

Galina, a sometime pupil of Genya's, nodded. "It takes the help of a Heartrender, and ideally a Healer on standby in case something goes wrong, but we're working on whole body transformations for those who want them permanently. Temporary is easier, but of course you have to maintain it."

"Impressive," Nikolai sounded genuinely pleased, unlike the Queen whom Aleksander had heard was appalled at the idea. "Now, how long does this last, or," he added in an undertone to Aleksander, "Am I about to alarm the King into thinking he has a new pretender to the throne?"

"Better not," Aleksander chuckled and gestured to the Tailors to undo their work. If he thinks you might ever be a threat, it will be harder for you to make a move. If you ever will.

They left the Corporalkai headquarters and moved on towards the Summoners rooms.

"What is it with Grisha and beauty anyway?" Nikolai asked, rubbing at his nose where the tingling of the Tailoring still lingered. "Is there a reason you are all improbably beautiful -- enhanced in at least some cases?"

Aleksander shrugged. "Why does anyone undertake cosmetic work? Aside from injury repair or gender reassignment that is. Pride, because one can, because there is no need to settle when you can choose to become greater than you are."



Nikolai gave him another of those knowing looks. "Because what is beautiful tends to be less feared than what is not?"

"I find inspiring a little fear is very useful."

"A little, but not a lot."

"Why do you ask me questions when you believe you know the answers?"

"Because you take such joy in lying to me?" Nikolai teased. Then, more seriously, "I told you, I'm trying to understand who you are, all of you, not just what other *otkazat'sya* claim about Grisha but the lived experience."

"Why?"

"You know why."

Did he? Just how much did Nikolai dare to bring together this divided realm?

"Well," Nikolai continued lightly. "I'm the surplus, remember? I have to make myself useful somehow, and Vasily is very much more fond of me when I invest my energies in things he'd rather not deal with himself."

"Avoid horse-racing and whoring and you'll be fine then."

Nikolai snickered and they stepped into the Summoners' Quarters. These were much smaller and less ornate than those of the Corporalkai. More attention and funds had been directed to the lakeshore pavilions, given the practicalities of practising in the open air -- and the evidence of significant structural damage to parts of the building that had preceded that decision. There, Aleksander introduced him to one of his most talented students Zoya, who it turned out he already knew, and a handful of rising stars who were toying with some paradoxical element experiments. From the fresh char marks on the ceiling and the puddle of water spreading around them in the floor, fire out of ice had not been a success.

But it was the Fabrikators' workshops where he nearly lost Nikolai entirely. The Prince was fascinated by the terrariums, the machinery, the metalworking, immersing himself in experiment after experiment with even more curiosity -- and a great deal more enthusiasm -- than he'd shown in the Corporalki anatomy rooms. Not for the first time, Aleksander found himself wondering where the young prince went when he claimed to be studying the course his father was paying for at the University. And how he'd come to know so much about potential flight mechanisms, engineering, and the laws of physics. Once he got talking to David Kostik, a Fabrikator who was nearly impossible to interrupt and who possessed the kind of detailed focus that Aleksander couldn't help but admire, he left him to it and went to check on some of the other postgraduates enhancements of the sand skiffs used to cross the Fold.

It was nearly lunchtime before Nikolai managed to tear himself away, leaving Aleksander with a new respect for the thinking that was clearly being done by *otkazat'sya* elsewhere and

a near certainty that Nikolai's interest in the Grisha was not merely to ingratiate himself to Vasily.

"Show me something you've been up to," Nikolai said as they arrived back in the war room for the prince to gather his things before he headed back to the Grand Palace.

"It's spring, Niko," Aleksander said mildly, beginning to pour out two glasses of hot tea from the cabinet between two of the enormous maps of Ravka on the walls. "The winter fete is months away."

"I'm not asking for a spectacle," Nikolai retorted. "I know you better than that. I have plans for us tonight and getting left outside without my clothes on isn't part of it."

Aleksander laughed. "Then what do you want? We've talked about the wars, the Fold, the resources shortages near the frontlines, the failure of a number of the recruits to my Oprichniki to make the grade this season, and half a dozen other issues besides. What makes you think I have time for anything more -- besides arguing with the King about his priorities and riding all over Ravka trying to manage all of this, of course."

"Well, I hear you're not taking anyone to bed but me..." Nikolai said impishly, startling another chuckle from Aleksander.

"Your spies are getting good."

"...so you must do something when I'm not here and you find yourself between problems, or," with another of his knowing looks, "when action is not immediately possible."

Aleksander settled into a chair opposite him, stretched out his legs and contemplated.

"You mean summon something, I suppose."

"You practise, like everyone else. What have you learned new, or perfected, or been working on lately?"

There were many things, most of which the prince would be better off not knowing he could do, or knowing that he'd even consider developing from scratch. Aleksander had enough people keen to see him dead and his grave desecrated without adding Os Alta's second son to the list. Nikolai had proved difficult to shock or intimidate, but centuries of life much of it rife with war and prejudice meant Aleksander had cultivated all manner of skills that he preferred to keep only for their intended uses and away from most people's eyes.

A thought occurred and he smiled suddenly. "Very well."

He extended his hands and shadows swarmed across the three dimensional map of Ravka on the table, displacing the handful of little movable pieces that stood for armies, and rearing up into hundreds of individual forms. With few twitches of his fingers, he had tiny soldiers, ranks upon rank, each able to move independently and assembling in formations across one of the commonest battlefields. Nikolai set down his tea glass and leaned over for a better look.

"Is this *merzost*?"

Aleksander tilted one hand in a so-so gesture. "No, not quite. These shadows have form but no independent thought or entities. They move only as chess pieces would. It's close, perhaps, and there is some debate over what qualifies -- a discussion I prefer to leave to scholars -- but it's harmless. I couldn't send them into your room to hurt you, for example, nothing more than a scare with some shadow-puppetry. Anyway, this isn't what I learned so recently. Watch."

He shifted the configuration of his fingers, and the shadows began to change colour. Some became blue, others red, purple, green. They held their colours even as he separated them from their groups, mingling them into new units, as if adding Corporalkai, Materialkai, and Etherialki to ordinary military units. Nikolai watched with a growing fascination, then laughed softly as the coloured shadows danced over his hands.

"I was right about you being a general through and through then, even when you have time to yourself you're plotting something."

Aleksander shook his head. "Not really." He hesitated, wondering if this went too far as a confidence between them, then confessed. "When I was young, I was afraid of the dark. So much so that it took me longer than many my age to begin to use my powers, longer to gain any mastery of them."

"You surprise me. I assumed you were a child prodigy."

"Later, I was," Aleksander said it without pride, keeping his voice as empty of the memories of that time as possible. "But at first, I was a failure. You've met my mother. You can imagine how she reacted. There are so very few with this particular gift after all. In between chastisements and trying to find things that would frighten me far more than my power in her attempts to make me use it, she would summon shadow puppets for me and change the colours of them so I wouldn't be so afraid. It was something I loved to watch her do, but never really mastered. I'd almost forgotten about it until I saw her show her boy -- Misha, I think he is -- the other day. So I decided to give it another go."

"I'd say you have it nailed."

They watched the coloured shadows for a few more moments, before Aleksander let them fade away.

"I should go," Nikolai sighed. "I have meetings with the King's advisors all afternoon. The usual delights about budgets and expenses -- no doubt mine will make an appearance, which is always a thrilling conversation -- various charitable endeavours and Vasily wants me to charm a couple ambassadors to refresh some trade alliances."

"While he goes to look at new horses for his string? I suppose at least he knows how to play to both your strengths."

"Careful," Nikolai reproached, despite the glint of mischief in his eyes. "He is still the Heir Presumptive, you know."

Aleksander sketched a shallow bow with no real respect behind it. "I have matters to attend to as well. Paperwork to sign, people to threaten."

"Will you be away from the Palaces?"

"Briefly, back before nightfall. I suspect I need to make an appearance for whoever it is your father is entertaining tonight at dinner."

"The Kerch ambassadors," Nikolai scarcely avoided rolling his eyes. "An afternoon and evening of them. Perhaps I should abandon my charm and practice making people wet themselves too."

Aleksander chuckled and leaned over to kiss him. "Until later?"

"I'll make excuses after the brandy. Here?"

"I'll leave the wards off the North door."

The dinner with the ambassadors had been as irksome as Aleksander expected. Novyi Zem, Shu Han, even Fjerda, he could stomach but the pompous little island's fat-cat ambassadors and their back-door enslavement of Grisha irritated him more than he cared to admit. While he was well-aware of the potential value in alliances with a people to whom nothing except coin and commerce was sacred, he was even more aware that Ravka had little to offer them except Summoners, Heartrenders, and Fabrikators that Kerch would use and spit-out as it did its own Grisha. And he loathed the King's willingness to accept that as fair trade for fresh funds or debt forgiveness.

He had excused himself as soon as was politik and stood now on his balcony, sipping from a glass of honey wine, and trying to cool his temper. He'd not been there long when he heard the click of the north door -- Nikolai must have come across the grass to muffle his footsteps -- and then the double knock, first his Oprichniki guards on the outer doors to his suite, then the rap of Ivan, one of his two Heartrenders, on the door to his bedroom.

"Send him in," he called, and then, as the bedroom door closed again, "Out here, Niko."

Socked feet padded over the rug, then the curtains swept back and Nikolai came to stand beside him.

"Did you get what you wanted?" Aleksander asked automatically.

"I made a trade," Nikolai sounded disgusted with himself. "They're happy, we're still functioning, and I've been offered a complimentary postgraduate place at the University. The King is delighted."

He stole Aleksander's glass and took a long drink of the wine. When he set it aside, he turned to face Aleksander, with restless frustration steeping his brows and pulling grimly at the corners of his mouth.

“Now, I had plans tonight and I mean to make good on them. Otherwise, I’m going to get horribly drunk and I’d rather leave that to my family.”

“We’ve war councils all tomorrow,” Aleksander reminded him. “There will be more than enough there to induce a headache without a hangover.”

“Well then,” Nikolai retorted and, stepping in close, pulled Aleksander into a long, hungry kiss.

They’d barely broken for air when Nikolai was shoving at the lapels of Aleksander’s kefta, sliding one leg between his and rocking against him in a way that made Aleksander shiver. There was night enough left to take advantage of, and sensing Nikolai needed something to take the edge off, Aleksander reached for the buttons on the prince’s dress-shirt.

“So impatient,” he murmured, his lips following the path of his fingers, kissing a long slow line down Nikolai’s chest as the shirt began to fall open and Aleksander sank gracefully to his knees.

“Well,” Nikolai agreed, “I’m not known for my restraint, only my good looks and dazzling charm. And I have this burning desire to have you, hard, over this rail tonight, with only the shadows to hide us.”

Aleksander’s breath caught in his chest, his blood surging southward like a wild spring tide.

“You have been planning this, haven’t you?” he hissed, hooking his fingers into the top of Nikolai’s dark blue silk trousers and tugging, as if he might simply tear them rather than unlace.

“For weeks,” Nikolai quipped back. “Maybe even months. My classes are not very interesting. All economics and politics, which I get plenty of when I’m home. I spend a thoroughly unreasonable amount of time when I should be studying fantasizing about your arse. I could write essays on it.”

That, Aleksander suspected, was a lie. Wherever Nikolai went when he disappeared for months on end, he was not at the university. A contact in Ketterdam had discovered that the prince had a decoy sitting his classes. But personal truths had never mattered much between them. Aleksander nipped the prominent arch of the prince’s iliac crest, revelling in the sharp hitch of Nikolai’s hips toward him.

“Just my arse?”

Nikolai’s hand curved around his jaw and gripped, sending a sudden thrill through Aleksander at the illusion of restraint, the reminder that, here, he could surrender some of his steely self-control and simply be, simply feel. Nikolai’s thumb trailed over Aleksander’s lips, pressing briefly inside, and then spreading the moisture he found there slowly down his chin.

“I’d say your mouth,” he remarked, low and rough. “But you spend far too much time talking.”

“Me?” Aleksander scoffed, fingers weaving deftly through the ties securing Nikolai’s breeches. He teased the light fabric down and again his mouth followed it, pausing only long enough to warn, “That’s fighting talk, my prattling prince.”

Nikolai’s hand twisted suddenly into his hair. Aleksander grinned up at him, tossing his head as if he might fight the hold. Nikolai’s fingers tightened until it stung and a rough jerk forced his smirking mouth where the prince wanted it.

“Go on then,” Nikolai baited. “Fight me.”

Aleksander’s first blow was a kiss, his second the long wet stripe of a lick. Nikolai threw back his head and moaned, his taunts turning to gasps and urgent words of encouragement. Aleksander would have laughed, but very shortly he didn’t have enough air.

When he tapped the back of Nikolai’s hand a little while later, his shoulders were shaking and breathless dampness had gathered at the corners of his eyes.

“What?” Nikolai groaned, releasing his hold on Aleksander’s hair and wrapping his hand around himself instead. Aleksander rose smoothly to his feet, wiping his mouth. “What are you still snickering about?”

“You were listing saints,” Aleksander told him with a grin. “You missed a few, but it seemed wise to stop before you were...spent.”

Nikolai gritted his teeth, visibly pulling himself back from the brink. “Expecting Sankta Sasha too?”

Aleksander kissed him, hard enough to bruise, cried out suddenly as Nikolai released himself and pressed the heel of his hand hard against Aleksander’s groin, rubbing him through the skin-tight leather of his breeches.

“No,” he gasped, as Nikolai’s free hand twined into his hair again, their mouths chasing, licking, kissing, biting as the prince pivoted them in place. Aleksander felt the solid stone of the balcony rail against his lower back, struggled to remember what he was saying. “No sainthood for me, thank you. It would h-hardly suit.”

“You’re powerful enough, I’m sure. Not good enough, though,” Nikolai teased, thumbing open the buttons of Aleksander’s breeches and curling his cool hand around him in earnest. “Or bad enough, I don’t think--”

*You don’t know...* Better too that he never did. There was plenty in his past that Aleksander would prefer to leave behind, however much he doubted that he could.

“--what qualifies one for sainthood anyway?”

“A messy, self-sacrificial death. Murder. Self-destruction. The tragic yet convenient side-effect of some grand world-saving gesture. Something suitably heroic must go ahead of them all, of course.”

“Ah.” Nikolai’s mouth moved across his jaw, his ear, trailed down his neck to suckle at the sensitive junction between throat and collarbone. His hands seemed to be everywhere, loosening buckles and buttons, sliding up under Aleksander’s shirt to rub relentlessly over his nipples, and then down again, gripping, stroking, squeezing, teasing until Aleksander could only clutch at his shoulders, chanting soft oaths over and over again. And still Nikolai kept talking. “I thought there must be something...unusual...about it. Otherwise we’d have to have a sign-up list outside the city dungeons. We’d be littered with saints. There’s plenty of dramatic deaths amongst the prisoners.”

He drew back a little and said seriously, “Remind me to do something about that?”

Aleksander bunched his fists in the loose fabric of Nikolai’s shirt, yanking him close again.

“Later,” he growled, reclaiming the prince’s attention with a searing kiss. “Yappy brat of a puppy. I thought you had plans for us tonight?”

Quick as a flash, Nikolai brought both hands up between Aleksander’s, forced his arms apart and broke his grip. A yank on his wrist, a quick step and a trip, and Aleksander barely caught himself before he crashed headlong into the railing. Nikolai’s weight bore down on him, making his hands slip on the smooth stone, pressing his chest up hard against it. There was a light kick to his ankle, but Aleksander was already stepping wide, rolling his hips back to urge Nikolai on.

“Such plans,” Nikolai promised, one hand working Aleksander until his head dropped forward, his breath coming in erratic gasps. The other hand was fumbling in his pockets for supplies.

Footsteps sounded on one of the paths below. Nikolai swore under his breath and buried his face in the back of Aleksander’s rucked up kefta. Aleksander groped hastily for his power, cloaking them in thicker shadows, strengthening the wind so that the drapes behind them billowed and clapped to disguise any movements they might make.

He nearly bit through his tongue when Nikolai pressed slick fingers into him without warning. Snatching one hand back from summoning, he crammed it over his own mouth to stifle his shout and stamped on Nikolai’s foot in complaint. Nikolai answered with a crook of his fingers that made him all but forget what he was complaining about. The bastard was snickering as the footsteps faded away into the woods.

“Ready?” he asked innocently, fingers still teasing relentlessly.

“Ready to drop you in a deep river in a sack with a rock, *sobachka*,” Aleksander snarled over his shoulder. Then, as Nikolai laughed outright, pressed back into him fiercely and urged, “Come on.”

Breathless himself now, Nikolai obliged. And then talk was beyond them, their gasps and groans all but lost in the wind wheeling through the trees.

Down in the woods below, Genya Safin pressed her back against a sturdy silver birch. Far too late to obscure the images burned onto her retinas, she covered her eyes. Find me my son, the King had said, still sprawled lazily in his great bed as, shuddering, she scrambled back into her clothes. *Send me my body servant, then find me my Nikolai* -- as if she were no specialist Fabrikator but another servant at his beck and command, and the youngest prince merely a rebellious dog who had wandered away behind his back. Servants, she thought, were at least trained for this. What was she supposed to do now -- whistle? She shivered, imagining the Darkling's ire if she dared, if he knew that she'd even seen. What he might do to her if he ever found out would be a thousand times worse than even the pawing of the King. All the way back to the Grand Palace, she spent struggling to find words that might avoid the inevitable, and explain why she had returned without Nikolai.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

Warning: implied non-graphic sexual assault

When Nikolai strolled in the next morning, his family were already seated around the circular table by the tall arched windows of the breakfast room that overlooked the distant double tiers of the city.

“There he is!” Vasily exclaimed, a cup of eye-wateringly strong honey-wine already clasped in his fist. “Where have you been all night, brother?”

He wagged his eyebrows knowingly. *Not touring every whorehouse in Os Alta like you, brother.* Nikolai thought with an inward smirk as he pictured Vasily’s gap-mouthed astonishment if he really knew where his little brother had been all night, and with whom. Outwardly he blinked, as if in surprise.

“Why, in my rooms,” he replied. “Forgive my tardiness, I went out early for a ride.”

“I thought I saw you coming back down The Walk on that funny little coloured horse you like so much,” the Queen said, turning her cheek with a smile for Nikolai’s kiss. “Were you meeting friends, Niko? You didn’t forget to take your guards, I hope?”

“Would I frighten you so?” Nikolai widened his eyes theatrically and laid a hand on his breast, though he had, as usual, slipped their watch. “Mother, I’m devastated. As if I would do such a thing!”

She laughed, cradling him close for a moment as he kissed her again.

“Who were the friends?” Vasily asked, leaning across the table with a leer. “They must’ve been good company. I’d swear by the look of your rooms that you’d been out all night.”

*Spying on me, again, brother?* Nikolai let his smile slip back into another look of earnest surprise. It was a source of vexation that Vasily, usually so self-centred and oblivious, was paranoid enough by Nikolai’s popularity that he was constantly snooping for signs of an impending coup. If he’d suspected there was anything more behind Nikolai’s friendliness with the Darkling than his ability to get on with everyone, even uptight and prickly Grisha generals, he would not be in such good humour. Nikolai was well aware that in addition to simply enjoying Aleksander’s company, he was courting what could be a very powerful alliance. Knowing Vasily was oblivious, Nikolai risked sticking the proverbial knives in.

“I was studying last night.” *One, I’m better educated and know more of the world than you do.* “I headed out at dawn and must have made my own bed without thinking. Filthy military

habit.” *Two, I’ve served without a commission and you haven’t.* “And, yes, I met some friends. You wouldn’t believe how many invitations were waiting for me -- dinners, dances, drinks, and drives galore!” *Three, everyone who is anyone, and everyone who isn’t, likes me better than you.* Enjoying the souring of his brother’s countenance, he turned to his mother and continued lightly, “It would be too cruel not to see people while I’m here -- you know how they pine for my pretty face and sparkling company.”

She petted his cheek. “How could they not, my darling? I miss you dearly when you are away.”

“Fear not, I have a great many ideas entirely devoted to your entertainment for the rest of my stay,” Nikolai vowed, then, more seriously. “I have missed you too.”

Clasping the hand she placed in his, he slid into his seat beside her.

“I hope these excursions are useful, Nikolai.” The King looked up from pouring sour cream onto his vareniki. “It’s all very well courting favour” -- that was a warning if ever he heard one -- “and enjoying all the amusements in Os Alta” -- *Are you talking to me or Vasily there?* -- “but there’s business to be done here too.” *When you remember it.*

“I promise it’s not all shows and sweetmeats.” Nikolai kept his tone airy. “I’ve been meeting with your advisors, governors, and military commanders too, getting myself back up to speed with our current priorities.”

“Yes.” There was something off in the King’s tone now, something as unsubtle as Vasily’s prying. “I heard you were at the Little Palace again for much of yesterday.” *Damn.* “With the Darkling.” *Double damn.* “Rather late into the night.” *Shit.*

Vasily looked as though he’d sat in a nettle bed. This would do little to dispel his fears that Nikolai wanted his crown. Thinking fast, doubting that either the King or his brother had an inkling of what he’d really been doing at the Little Palace, Nikolai nodded.

“Yes, the General was updating me on the condition of the Second Army, the ongoing difficulties of travel across the Fold, and rising numbers of Grisha refugees fleeing over the borders from Fjerda and Shu Han.”

Technically, he had. *And then he spent quite some time reminding me exactly where and how he enjoys my cock.*

The King eyed so him narrowly that Nikolai wondered for a heart-stopping moment whether he’d said that last thought out loud. Trusting he was not such a fool, he held the King’s gaze with innocent eyes. Eventually, the King grunted.

“Well, good.” Nikolai hoped that would be the end of it, but the King continued in that same probing tone, “How do you find the General’s company, Nikolai?”

*Intense. Intoxicating. Intriguing.*

He shrugged, as if the question were not as pointed as it sounded. “He’s, well, you know yourself what he’s like. Insightful. Informative. Incredibly committed to his duty and to Ravka. He’s not got my dazzling repartee and delightful personality, but you can’t blame the man for that. He doesn’t have such fabulous parents, does he?”

There, that should disarm them. His mother smiled, but the King simply masticated part of his dumpling and patted sour cream off his beard with a napkin, seeming deep in thought. Though how much depth he had in his brain pan was something Nikolai had pondered for some time.

“His mother is still teaching the Grisha children, isn’t she?” the Queen enquired, looking up from a crystal glass she was examining. She turned to a young servant. “Here, this is cracked. Please take it away and have one of the Fabrikators mend it.” Returning her attention to Nikolai, she went on. “My Tailor tells me there are some very fine summoners in the ranks of the Second Army now. Someone called, oh, what was it? Zarja? Zilya?”

“Zoya. Zoya Nazyalensky.”

“Yes, that was it. Quite the prodigy I understand.”

“She’s on leave back at the Little Palace at the moment. I saw her yesterday. And I was on the front with her a couple of years back.” Nikolai was grateful to his mother for shifting the tone of the conversation, though he couldn’t be sure she knew she was doing it. “She’s a remarkable squaller. Quite a find.” He began to recount to her some of his experiences working with Grisha on the frontlines, keeping a weather eye on his father and brother.

Vasily seemed to have subsided, growing bored now he thought Nikolai’s only interest had been in military chit-chat. *Foolish, brother. Though I suspect the Darkling is more likely to stage a coup himself than support a hostile takeover from me.* The King was nodding along, apparently interested in Nikolai’s adventures with his fellow soldiers. *Though if his next meeting is with the Apparatus, he’ll be pouring half the treasury’s budget into building more churches and altars than diverting them to the supplies both armies badly need.* Even so, when Nikolai had finished and before the conversation turned to other things, the King said,

“Don’t get too close to the Darkling, will you, boy?”

What was that supposed to mean? It sounded more worried than warning this time.

Nikolai feigned a laugh, shook his head, and lied. “I doubt I’d be able to if I tried.”

The King seemed less than satisfied with that, but Vasily had begun to talk of the upcoming races, and which horses he might bet on and, to Nikolai’s relief, he let it slide.

\*

Although he took updates on a nearly daily basis, the King’s propensity to delay any decisions until he could spend a day cloistered in a room with all his military and political advisors was one of the aspects of his rulership that most raised the Darkling’s blood pressure. The days were long, difficult to coordinate, pulled people away from immediate

priorities -- meaning any agenda was constantly interrupted by messengers with updates -- and filled with the King's humming and hawing and endless second guessing of every decision that had been made on his behalf, and often his own as well. Worse, the King preferred to run the day from his throne room, where he could sit in relative comfort, while everyone else was forced to stand in the chilly marble hall. The Darkling strongly suspected the King hoped it would keep the meetings succinct, but it never did. The result was that everyone was on edge before the council began and it was guaranteed that at least three people would lose their tempers before the day's end.

To the Darkling it was a point of pride that he was rarely the one to do so, but he'd woken to the news of another skiff lost to the Fold the previous day, this one taking with it a group of long-standing Grisha Squallers and Inferni that he'd been rather fond of, and a warning that the volcra were not only breeding but hunting in larger packs. Not for the first time, he wished that sun-summoners were not as rare as shadow ones, and that the Making at the Heart of the World had a better sense of balance than to leave him juggling Ravka's fragile future alone. More than anything he hated the relentless legacy of this so-called ancestral mistake, which he alone was responsible for and could neither use nor put right.

The morning of the war council was spent bickering over that blasted stretch of dead land and its feral flying inhabitants. Every issue of resources always came back to the dangerous crossing between Ravka's west coastal ports and the lands nearer the capital. There were arguments about where the current incoming military resources should be shipped first, how to make up the short-fall, why there weren't more Second Army available to support defence and travel, whether the split was right between those Grisha who served in the military and those who took up places with the merchants and traders, and finally, why the Little Palace wasn't doing more to improve the sandskiffs, enhance weaponry, or -- the Darkling's favourite to date -- go out on what amounted to suicide missions culling the volcra.

"It can't be that hard to light the place up!" Igor Stepanov roared, when the Darkling grew sharp explaining why hunting parties were not a sensible use of resources. "Or to suck the darkness out of it -- can't help thinking you're just dragging your heels, Darkling old boy, making sure you and your kind have some purpose in Ravka."

*Yes, and Sun Summoners are as common as copper coins.* The Darkling closed his teeth on that answer, letting his silence drag pointedly out. Up behind the throne, he saw Nikolai gag himself by pressing a fist against his mouth, masking it as a cough. Dimitri Antanov, a First Army general, and two of his own advisors Ruslan Kovalyov, and Roza Garin were all shaking their heads. The latter let a sheaf of copper curls slide over her face to hide the roll of her eyes. But others nodded, added their voices to the chorus, until the meeting dissolved into a spat over the shortcomings of both First and Second Armies.

With stony patience, the Darkling managed to turn the tide to restore some semblance of equilibrium to how strained resources could be best split to ensure maximum efficiency of both forces, aided by Nikolai, Antanov, and Garin, all of whom had some experience of best practice in collaborative or hybrid units. He'd agreed to increase the availability of Grisha soldiers to support more Fold crossings and to add his personal support on priority missions, an act that was more a goodwill gesture than one of substance since his own powers were near useless in that swirling dark. The First Army countered by offering to reduce the draft

age from sixteen to fourteen to boost numbers and provide additional personnel, a proposal that made Nikolai pale and object, while Vasily enthused, and the King pondered.

And so it went on. By midday, the agenda was scrap and the same old circles were being mapped again. With almost predictable timing, by the arrival of the lunch, the Darkling had been rebuked by the King for wasting time and resources each winter on the fete when that would cause a shortage in the spring and, in almost the same breath, asked when exactly he planned to start preparations for the next fete, which needed to be grander than any other as the King needed a good show to shore up their alliance with the Zemini. The Darkling managed something approximating a suitable answer and then had to walk away to get his frustration under control.

His mood did not improve when he passed by the princes in hot debate by one of the buffet tables and heard Vasily say,

"You should keep your damned opinions to yourself, Nikolai Nothing!"

The Darkling did not know from where Nikolai summoned his airy laugh before he replied only, "If my words mean so little, why should you mind that I speak them?"

He was starting to wonder if the young prince had some hitherto undiscovered Grisha power. His glibness and apparent ability to shrug off any insult was all but preternatural.

The afternoon degenerated even further. The King clutched at his coffers and prevaricated over the Darkling's proposal to counter the Fjerdan and Shu incursions on the northern and southern borders, insisting in the face of substantial evidence that the threats were being overstated. Through teeth that wanted to grit, the Darkling again walked him through the volume and severity of the invasions, the consequences for the local farmers, trappers, fishers, and hunters, as well as travellers from both sides of the borders, and the suspected targets: Grisha children, employees, and soldiers posted there, whom the Fjerdans tended to burn at the stake and the Shu liked to dismember in the hopes that they could identify and recreate their natural abilities with technologies. The Shu treatment of their own Grisha had galled the Darkling for centuries. In time, he intended to have the sway to do something about it. For now, this naked disrespect for his territory -- and the political implications for the King -- was not something he was prepared to put aside.

And still the King dithered, making evasive noises about the Second Army not pulling enough of their weight in priority areas to divert personnel and resources to the borders, and muttering again about the issue of the Fold crossings that had seemed earlier to have been resolved. It was nearing evening when the Darkling's patience frayed enough for him to bark,

"And how do you expect me to meet your relentless demands if you will not enable me to bring in and train more people to serve you? This is not some bleeding-heart campaign, *moi tsar*; there are practical benefits to shore up our forces too."

*Not to mention protecting your damn subjects on the borders, who seem beneath your notice.*

"You don't need to recruit refugees for that. You could just lower your draft age too," Vasily said. "Eighteen is two years older than the age for ordinary soldiers. Why not make it sixteen as well? Or better yet, fourteen?"

"Excellent idea, brother," Nikolai drawled, "As well as sending out ordinary babes who barely know which end of a sword is the pointy one, let's send out half-trained children with complex and unusual talents that they haven't fully mastered and hope we don't massacre them or accidentally cause too many disasters behind our own lines."

"If they started training earlier," Vasily said patronisingly, "they would be ready."

"We bring children into the Little Palace as young as five," the Darkling interjected. "Additional years of training does not guarantee control or precision until near adulthood."

"Then train them as First Army soldiers too," Vasily exclaimed, ignoring the fact that all the Grisha were given grounding in hand-to-hand combat and had little need of training on distance weapons since their own powers were far better suited. "Let them serve in the First Army to start with."

"And so reduce the number of Grisha who make it to adulthood, thus slashing the numbers in the Second Army further and doing nothing to improve the situation!"

Nikolai's temper was getting the better of him, a rare event, though the Darkling could not have said it better himself. The King mumbled something of an agreement, and Vasily flushed.

"Why don't you just go ahead and lick our General's boots, brother," he snapped. "Or maybe his arse."

The Darkling gave that the icy look it deserved, while Nikolai laughed and Kovalyov choked on his wine.

"You'd be safer kissing a volcra, lad," he exclaimed.

The Darkling held his tongue, but old resentments from childhood stirred, jibes and taunts about his seemingly monk-like indifference to the sensual, his unusual gift, his popularity with his tutors, and his vindictiveness, which grated against already abraded nerves. Foolish irritations, he knew, though that didn't stop them coming. Despite the vaulted ceiling, endless windows, and marble tiling on the floors, the room had reached the temperature of a boiling pot.

Nikolai, in control of himself again, made some light reply and then excused himself on the pretext of needing a toilet break. The Darkling suspected he was the only one who heard the younger prince thump the wall outside, and then only because he was listening for it.

Vasily, offended and increasingly drunk, announced that while he was sure all this was utterly critical to the safety for the realm, he had other business to attend and departed, the act clearly calculated to make it impossible for Nikolai to return too. The King did not dissuade

him and instead used it as an opportunity to grant others with travel demands and incoming urgent messages to excuse themselves, and whittled down the numbers in the room.

The Darkling recognised the steps of this part of the dance all too well. The meeting was now First Army heavy and yet the topic was Second Army needs. The evening was promising to be protracted and painfully difficult. The debate dragged on as the twilight began to turn the windows purple-blue and servants came in to light the lanterns. More food and drink was brought in, though no one was really interested, save the King, who motioned for more wine at every man's pause for breath.

"These insurgents cannot go unchallenged," the Darkling repeated for what must have been the fifth time in the last hour. "If we do not defend our borders, what then? Do we allow them to be moved in upon us every season?"

Stepanov scoffed. "There's little of value that far out, Darkling. You only care because of your precious Grisha. No one of consequence lives out there."

It was little comfort that the Darkling was not alone in contradicting that absurd statement, with several other First Army generals reeling of a list of popular trade items -- wool, wine, meats, and various plants that were unique to the diverse altitudes, as well as favoured tourist spots and winter sports events.

"My 'precious Grisha,'" the Darkling added, when the volley of objections had quietened down, "remain the potential additional personnel that everyone is so insistent I must provide. While the Fjerdans may simply murder them for the sake of their superstitions -- no concern of yours, Stepanov, I am sure -- the Shu present a more significant threat. They are not merely torturing our people -- and slaughtering those who have sheltered them -- but they are attempting to harness, recreate, and use our own talents against us by enhancing ordinary soldiers. They are bolstering their forces by trafficking and experimenting on our subjects. To put it in terms you will understand, by not protecting our own and providing safety for refugees, we are leaving holes in our defences and wasting human resources."

"Why should you be permitted to reach out over the borders for new recruits?" Benedikt Sidorov demanded, "There won't be enough to justify the costs or the risk. You're not going to make up enough numbers to compensate for the cut to our budgets that such missions will require. The Second Army is, what, half the size of the First?"

"A quarter." *And yet still you accuse us of not providing enough people.*

"Well then, you take my point."

"First Army draws on refugees in exchange for shelter and aid," the Darkling growled, a headache starting to pound in his temples. "The equation here is very simple. You all want more from the Second Army than we have the manpower to provide. Either we need a larger pool to recruit from or we are unable to oblige."

"You'll do as you've promised, Darkling," the King said sharply, though the Darkling had made no suggestion he would renege on his previous commitments. "And you'll find a way

to provide at least ten percent more personnel before any further funds are committed to border endeavours. Then, we will see.”

“And what would you like me to make them out of?” the Darkling snapped, striding towards the dais. He hardly registered the soft thunk as his boot settled on carpet instead of stone. “Shadows?”

A deafening silence settled slowly around him. The King leaned forward and fixed livid blood-shot eyes on him. His weak chin quivered as he barked,

“You forget your place, General.”

As if that were ever allowed. Nonetheless, the Darkling bowed, careful to give a little extra depth and duration to the gesture. It was not enough. The King's lips curled and the Darkling knew with the soporific swoop of certainty it would never have been enough. He'd crossed enough kings before to know there were consequences. Whatever little humiliation would be in store for this one, he would ride it out as one did a bout of bad weather. With this king, at least, it would be brief; whimsical and weak-willed as he was, he would have drowned his ire in wine soon enough.

“Kneel.”

The Darkling to his knees smoothly, gracefully, as if it were no trial to submit to this chinless, spineless fool who preferred to see his Grisha General perform parlour tricks than protect Ravka from her enemies. The King heaved himself up and the Darkling grimly took the cue to subjugate himself further, letting his forehead touch the chill marble right at the edges of that musty crimson carpet.

“Ah-ah.” That mocking note, so like Nikolai's bar the mirthless humour behind it. “I said,” heavy footsteps descended the dais, “Kneel.”

The Darkling reared upright again, chin raised, emotionless. The King was standing before him, his hands level with his hips, fidgeting with his clothes the way he toyed with his wine glass before a refill. The atmosphere in the room shifted. There were few enough people left, a handful of senior officers from the First Army, the King's most immediate guard, a smattering of servants swiftly making themselves scarce, twelve at most, including the King. Yet the vast room felt improbably crowded, breathless and humid, the air pressurised as though before an impending storm. Remotely, the Darkling supposed he could imagine it: he cold, ash-pale, black-clad, sunk to his knees before the puffed-up, sweating, wine-florid king. He was not afraid, but nor was his mask of icy boredom entirely free from facade. His pulse thundered in his ears. The King's rings gleamed in the lamplight, forking flashes of gold as his fingers moved with sudden purpose.

Was there a gasp? Somewhere, far off, the Darkling thought there might have been. It wasn't his. He'd lived a long time. There was little enough left that surprised him. Indeed he was not sure what, if anything, he felt or ought to feel. The King's motions were unmistakable. Yet for an endless moment the Darkling studied those flickering rings, at once distantly aware of the inevitable and dully uncomprehending. Then the lacings of the royal breeches slithered



open, like snakes seething from a disturbed nest. He allowed himself the fleetest moment to close his eyes and take a slow, steeling breath.

He could hear the vicious smile in the King's voice as he said, "It is time you remembered who you serve."

He'd suffered through innumerable punishments at the hands of Lantsov dynasty. This was...new. It was not by far the cruellest, but it was the crudest. Twelve people in this room, no more Grisha than two Heartrenders guards amongst them. He did not have to affect this servitude. He could turn this into a bloodbath. It would not be much of a battle. But it would lose him his longest running campaign in a far greater war. Such a small thing, so petty, too insignificant to take flight from now, when the path back was again so tedious and littered with bodies.

*So...*

Keeping his voice bland, as if this were no more than another tiresome banquet to endure, the Darkling drawled, "Of course, *moi tsar*; I serve your majesty's pleasure."

The air smelt thick and ripe, a kind of poisonous petrichor that caught in his nose and throat, foreboding slick footing and uncannily reminding him of the salt taste of the herring served daily in the Grisha breakfast hall. For a moment, he wavered, his pride all but choking him. He gritted his teeth and, with a hard swallow, forced it back.

The polished leather toes of the King's boots made contact with his knees. The dense perfume pervading his clothes was dizzying. Their folds slithered over his face and shoulders as the King stooped, whispered for his ears alone,

"Yours too, I understand."

The words connected like a slap. The King knew. The Darkling did not sway, did not blink, did not let a flicker of reaction cross his countenance. He would not give the King the satisfaction.

*You understand nothing.*

The King knew, or suspected, only the facts: that his stern Grisha general was tumbling with his precious puppy-prince. The Darkling had neither time nor patience to seek out and untangle the salacious spin whoever had betrayed them would have enjoyed putting on it, though he could well enough guess the possibilities. In some, Nikolai was a young fool seduced by the shadowy Grisha incubi whose lusts were as dark as his powers. In others, the Darkling himself had fallen to the hedonistic young prince's desires. In still more, no doubt, they were preying upon each other, their trysts little more than politics and power-play. Nothing that came near the truth of it. Whatever truth that was.

The Darkling let his eyes unfocus slightly; he didn't need to see to get this done and he'd never cared for the King's choice of spectacle. It took him a moment, but he forced his pounding pulse to come slow and steady, quelled the last of his desire to surge to his feet and slash the room to blood and tatters. Shadows still seethed within him, streaming towards his

fingertips; he balled his fists and reined them back. Then he unclenched his jaw and ordered himself to submit to the King's will.

\*

Some swift, interminable time later, it was done. His throat smarted and there was a film on his tongue as rank as herring-skin. Perspiration from the King's flabby stomach and thighs clung to his cheeks and chin as the man shuffled back, breathing hard. As he turned away, he made a vague gesture. Ears ringing, as though what few low lewd sounds had surrounded them had been an explosion, the Darkling started to rise. Hard hands seized his shoulders, shoved him down again. The King did not even glance back as he said,

"I told you, you forget your place."

*As what, you lack-wit Lantsov? What in all Ravka has this nonsense to do with the war effort?*

Striving to keep the sick shifting of his stomach from showing, the Darkling was caught off-guard when the boot slammed into his spine. The dais' steps surged up to split his lip, his nose, his brow. This time, the tide of boredom was real.

*Ah, yes. Of course. I am the General of the Second Army.*

## Chapter 4

Nikolai had retired with his mother and brother when it became apparent they had been dismissed. Three tumblers of his favourite brandy dwelled warmly in his stomach as he strolled through the wild-flower gardens under a starlit violet sky, letting the rich scents of spring blossom and the crisp breeze steer him back towards sobriety. Vasily was still at the wine, somewhere, and perhaps his latest woman too. His mother would be fussing at Genya as the red-headed tailor resculpted her face and hair from day to night version as she awaited her husband's return to their rooms. Between his duties here, his service in the first army, and his lessons at, or rather far beyond, the university, Nikolai had little enough time simply to himself. For the most part, he didn't mind it, but tonight the King had been as belligerent and boarish as any of his predecessors, his brother as blinkered as ever, and his mother so brightly determined to distract them all from one another before they brawled that he needed a few moments to collect himself. *As if we do not have enough enemies on our borders that we need seek them out within.*

He'd've preferred to have stayed in the throne room as the heated debates over how Ravka should respond to the now frequent incursions of the Fjerdan *druskelle* and Shu raiders along the mountain borders crawled long into the evening. But Vasily had tired of it and made pretexts for his own departure, forcing Nikolai to step out too. It was not seemly for the surplus to show more interest in Ravka's survival, and the persecution of Small Scientists, than the heir. If his nighttime stroll happened to take him near the Little Palace, which the Second Army General happened to call home, along the route said General was most liable to take, well, that was mere coincidence.

Nikolai settled himself on a stone bench under an arbour, stretched out his legs, and folded his arms behind his head, watching the evening sidle out from between the trees to sprawl indolently over the gardens. The air was cool and clear, conducting sounds from everywhere as if they were nearby. The patter of the distant courtyard fountains. The hiss and lap of the lake on the shores. The giggles of young Grisha students up late in their dormitories. The odd whicker of the pastured horses murmuring to one another. The whisper of the wind through the woodland trees.

It was not sound that made him turn his head, suddenly, in the opposite direction to the one he'd been gazing up the path. It was...*what?* A flickering of a shadow where no shadow should fall? The sense of a presence, a sourceless turbulence, in the tranquil night. Something unsettled within himself called to by its likeness. *Where?* There were no statues out here, as there were in the sculpted gardens. But...*there.* A dark shape cast by a tree that seemed more human than arboreal. Nikolai stood, called quietly,

"Aleksander?"

The shadow shifted, seemed to shrink and straighten, as though Nikolai might think himself mistaken, might not continue here to peer with a soldier's suspicious eye at any offbeat pattern. He was not that far in his cups. He never was. He said again, with more surety,

“Aleksander.”

The shadows thinned, darkened, thinned, and flickered again. Nikolai had half a heartbeat to realise he was witness to a struggle, that the General’s infamous control was shuddering out of his grasp, before Aleksander appeared.

He was slumped against a young oak, as if he could not trust his legs to hold him. His unshakable poise was crumpled, his shoulders stooped, his head bowed. His right arm was cradled around himself, palm cupping the elbow of his left, propping up his forearm so that his left hand half covered his face. A stray beam of moonlight breached the darkness, glinted on the blood that flowed through his fingers, running in crimson ribbons down his wrist to stain the gold thread embroidered on his kefta.

*Saints!* Nikolai was at his side in an instant. He'd spent long enough in war zones to catalogue Aleksander’s wounds in a single glance. Nose, possibly jaw, definitely eye socket, fractured. A deep head lac bleeding sluggishly on his brow. Ribs broken, three at least; the thin whistle of a damaged lung. Dislocated shoulder and knee on the left side. Opposite ankle barely holding weight. The only parts of him untouched seemed to be his hands. *No visible ligature marks. You weren't bound; you can still summon.* Whatever had happened to him, he must have surrendered to it. *Who? What? Why?* Nikolai's head was spinning, disbelief, disgust, dismay all sparring for attention. He opened his mouth, but Aleksander gave a single sharp shake of his head and snarled,

"Not here."

Then his legs buckled and Nikolai had to catch him before he hit the ground.

\*

His own chambers were closer. Without his guard in tow, Nikolai was not so unwise to stray far from the main paths, which were patrolled by the palace guard. But Aleksander’s rooms could be accessed privately and, as he had come from the Grand Palace, it didn’t take a genius to determine he wished to be as far from it as possible. Nikolai made short work of the physical locks on the hidden door into the northern quarters of the Little Palace, steadied Aleksander as he undid the enchantments too, and then guided them both inside, glad of an end to their agonising journey. Together, they stumbled through into one of the inner sitting rooms, and Aleksander staggered onto a grey velvet settee. Nikolai waited half a breath to be sure he wouldn’t lose consciousness, before he turned to an ebony table, seized a decorative basin, and passed it over for the Darkling to bleed into.

“You need a healer.”

Aleksander managed a scathing look over the rim of the little onyx bowl. It subsided into a fit of coughing that might have dislodged a tooth. Nikolai rubbed soothing circles between his shoulder blades until it was done, then moved away to pour a glass of water.

“Here. *Slowly.*”

Shifting the bowl to the limp cradle of his left arm, Aleksander took it. He sipped and, with sudden urgency, began to rinse his mouth in an almost frantic cycle of swigging and spitting. Frowning, Nikolai went to the door and stepped out long enough to summon a servant to send for a healer. If she were surprised to see the second son of the royal house there again, so late, it did not show. For all their sakes, Nikolai hoped the Darkling's people were as discreet as his own.

He returned to the inner chamber to find Aleksander alternating between wiping his mouth on his sleeve and pinching the bridge of his nose to stem the bleeding. Nikolai crouched down beside him, worrying the inside of his lip at the repetitiveness of Aleksander's motions.

"I'd ask what happened, but..."

"*Don't.*" Fierce, that. *Furious.*

"...I guess overenthusiastic folk-dance isn't it."

A stifled sound, somewhere between a snarl and a snicker. Nikolai reached up and eased a blood-matted sheaf of dark hair away from the gash near the Darkling's temple. It earned him a sidelong look, steely and searching, but when he tried to meet it Aleksander closed his eyes, as if afraid of what might be seen in return.

"Dizzy," he muttered, half-truth, half-lie, and listed back amidst the cushions.

"Keep your head tilted forward." Nikolai tore a strip off the bottom of his own shirt and pressed it into Aleksander's right hand, coaxing it back up towards his nose. "Don't swallow your own blood, you'll make yourself sick."

"Too late," Aleksander grumbled indistinctly, but he leaned forward again, resting his elbow on his uninjured knee for support.

It was a sign of...something...even silver-tongued Nikolai hadn't surely got a word for what, that the Darkling hadn't demanded he get out of his chambers, that he would tolerate the prince's presence here, now, even as he started to shiver with aftershocks. Nikolai shrugged out of his army-issue overcoat, which he'd slung on before he left for his walk, and settled it over Aleksander's shoulders. He left his arm there too, for warmth and good measure. The Darkling stiffened against him. Then, by degrees, he subsided, until he was using more of Nikolai's strength than his own to stay upright. They sat like that, unspeaking, while the Black Heretic's old grandfather clock marked time.

\*

A brisk rap on the door heralded the arrival of the healer. At the Darkling's reluctant command, she entered. Her red robes were as bright as the fresh blood that had stained the velvet couch, the turquoise strip of Nikolai's shirt, and both of their hands. She was familiar, Nikolai was relieved to see, a senior Corporalnik of the Second Army who had seen easily as much combat as he had. She asked no awkward questions, simply crossed the room, set down her medical bag, rolled up her sleeves, and got to work. Nikolai made way for her, moving to stand behind the couch so that she could negotiate the Darkling's damaged leg.

“I’ll start with your face,” she told the Darkling quietly. “I don’t like the look of that head-wound. Are you nauseous?”

He seemed to find that bleakly amusing. “It may not be related.”

The healer tsked at him. She lit the lantern on the side table and lifted it to peer into his eyes, muttering to herself as he grimaced. “Pupils unequal, light sensitivity. Yes, I thought so. Hold still.”

She passed the light to Nikolai and, while he held it for her, touched her fingertips to the Darkling’s temples to work on diffusing the brain swelling behind his shattered eye socket. Aleksander’s throat worked, as if he might be sick after all. Nikolai used his free hand to tear off another strip of his shirt and dunk it in the water pitcher. He laid the cool cloth on the nape of the Darkling’s neck and stroked his hair soothingly.

“Did you lose consciousness?”

“I don’t recall.” The Darkling set his teeth and breathed harshly through them as the healer began to set the fractured bones of his nose and eye socket.

“Your name?”

“The Darkling.”

She tutted, though she could know him by no other. “All right. His name.”

“*Sobachka*.” Nikolai bit back a grin; inappropriate as it was, he enjoyed the rare glimpses of Aleksander’s wry humour. The healer prodded something hard enough to make him swear. “All right, all right. He’s Prince Nikolai Lantsov.”

She grilled him for another few moments, demanding the date, the time, their names again, where they were, the time again, and which festivals of the year they were between. Finally, satisfied, she sat back on her heels.

“Clean warm water in another pitcher please and, for Saints’ sake, get some fresh towels instead of your sweaty shirt -- *moi tsarevich*,” she added as an afterthought.

Nikolai swept into an exaggerated bow, but obeyed. If the healer noted the ease with which he found the bathroom, another onyx pitcher, and some black towels with silver piping, she made no comment.

She gave the Darkling a few moments to mop the stress-sweat and drying blood off his face, while Nikolai silently angled a silver mirror from his perch on the back of the settee. Dark bruises were already blooming under Aleksander’s grey eyes, spreading like the wings of a flattened butterfly across the bridge of his swollen nose. His chin was grazed on the left side, his ear nicked, and another bruise starting to flood up through his sculpted stubble. When the healer raised her hands again to treat them, he warding her off with the towel.

“No, no, thank you.” His voice was hoarse, but firm. “I can hardly refuse to wear these when someone has gone to a great deal of trouble to ensure I am so richly decorated.”

Lowering the mirror to hide his own expression, Nikolai narrowed his eyes. Someone. There was only one someone with authority enough to supersede the Darkling's and, left to himself, he was nearly as much of a peacock as Nikolai. As subtly as possible, he studied Aleksander's bruises again, searching for ring marks. There were none, but the King had never been one to do his own dirty work. What had happened after they left the throne room? Silently, he cursed Vasily's flimsy concentration and addiction to his own pleasure.

"Very well." The healer's clipped tones said exactly what she thought of that, but she did not argue. She simply rose and said, "I suggest we relocate to your bedchamber. I need to restore your knee and shoulder to their sockets, set those breaks in your ribs and ankle, patch your left lung, and see to the swelling around your kidneys -- unless you also wish to wheeze and piss blood for a month?"

The Darkling tried, and failed, to raise an eyebrow. "That, I believe, is unnecessary."

"Good. I'll give you something for the pain before we get started. Or will you let me put you under?"

"No!" Fast that, almost...fearful. Perhaps he had lost consciousness after all. *And then what happened?* Nikolai watched uneasily as Aleksander ran his right hand over his lips again and again and again, striving for composure. "No, thank you. Do what you need and nothing more."

The healer rooted in her bag and came up with a small bottle, gesturing for a glass. The Darkling closed his hand over hers before she could release the stopper.

"I said, nothing more."

She twisted the bottle to show the label of a common painkiller, a combined analgesic and muscle relaxant. He shook his head, more kindly this time, but she did not back down.

"I need you to be still," she said evenly. "These injuries will make it impossible once I begin."

Shadows spread inwards from the edges of the room. A muscle jumped in his jaw.

Nikolai broke the stand-off. "Dole out your measure, Healer."

He picked up a bottle of kvass from the side table and, with a generous hand, slopped some into two smokey glasses. Then he took the dose from the Healer, turned his back and upended it into one of the two glasses. He turned back and, keeping a careful eye on the dosed glass, wove them around and around each other on the table until Aleksander blinked, dizzy. Then he handed him one.

"Drink. Who knows, I might get lucky and get rid of this headache you're giving me."

Aleksander shot him a glare that said he knew exactly what Nikolai was up to, since the healer could now confidently report to whomever might ask her that she had seen her patient drink only kvass to withstand his treatment. But he took the glass and sipped a little, wincing

as the mild alcohol burned his split lip. With a roll of his eyes, Nikolai perched on the edge of the settee, leaned over and clinked his glass against Aleksander's.

"Cheers," he said flatly, and knocked his drink back.

With another knowing look, the Darkling followed suit.

\*

When the jagged, pulsing edges of his hurts had had time to recede, the Darkling allowed Nikolai to help him through into the bedroom. A slight difference in the height and shape of the mattress suggested Nikolai had kept his word, and the bed was freshly made with clean black sheets beneath an ornately patterned charcoal divan. That aside, everything was as he had left it. In a week or so, when his bruises had faded, there would be no signs that this day had ever happened. Only his own memories, and those of the twelve other people present. That was enough. That was *more* than enough. But the discord between what he knew and how unchanged everything else around him seemed was uncanny, like the strange space between frontlines and untouched nearby towns still at peace during Ravka's endless wars. Of course, he admitted, as the prince eased him down onto the mattress and guided him into the position the healer requested, he was reckoning without Nikolai for that. Swallowing a sigh, he stared up at the four-poster's canopy. Then he clenched his fists as the Healer started to unfasten his ruined shirt.

The room darkened nonetheless. Power rose in a cold black tide, roaring in his blood, vibrating in his bones. His fingers started, involuntarily, to unfurl...

"Sasha." Whisper-soft, that, and urgent. Callused hands closed over his, the bed dipping as Nikolai settled beside him. "Easy. Squeeze my fingers if it hurts."

The pain was nothing to his rage, but he tightened his hold anyway.

"*Moi tsarevich*, you may wish to go." The healer's voice was steady, edged with the knowledge that they were all in danger.

"No," Nikolai answered, calm, commanding. "Unless...Darkling, do you wish me to leave?"

"No." Nikolai's hands in his were tethers, holding him to this moment, this room, this bed, keeping the throne room out. Keeping the darkness in. "No, you can stay."

Perversely, he wanted the prince to see what the King had done, even if he didn't know. *If...* That made him close his eyes for a moment. Nikolai was as clever as a fox. Very little made it past his sharp hazel eyes and quicksilver brain. *Stay then. See. Know.* He exhaled and opened his eyes.

"Healer, continue. You have my word, you will come to no harm today."

Easier said than done that was. But with Nikolai's strong hold to anchor him, the Darkling rode the tides of pain and fury and resentment, until the healer stepped back and began to



gather her things. Then he lay limp, breathing shallowly, only half aware of Nikolai murmuring words of comfort in a dozen languages.

"I'm finished," the healer said from the end of the bed. "You know what you may take, and where to obtain it, if you wish for greater comfort. If I may recommend it, I would advise abstaining from the activities that are responsible for your current state for several weeks."

"I may not have that luxury."

The words escaped before he thought the better of them. The healer paused, then turned stern eyes on Nikolai.

*"Moi tsarevich..."*

"It wasn't him."

"Nonetheless, perhaps you could...?"

Nikolai's voice was grim. "I may not have that luxury either "

So he did know. The who, at least, if not the what and why. The Darkling saw realisation cloud the healer's face too and, with an effort he tried to conceal, rose up onto his elbows, ignoring the burst of pain from his left shoulder.

"You swore an oath," he reminded her, his voice low, almost lazy, like a great cat prodding at a mouse, "that anything you see or hear during the treatment of a patient is kept in strictest confidence."

"I know my duty."

She sounded unhappy, as though she knew as well as he did that, in the end, nothing could be held in confidence from a king.

"See that you do." He stared her down until he was satisfied she would do the best she could, then nodded once. "Thank you for your services."

She returned his nod, and slipped away, silent as blood flowing down a drain.

Once they were alone, Nikolai's hand came to rest on his right shoulder, pushing gently. "Lie down. I'll get you a sleeping draft."

Aleksander sat up, almost reeled back as pain detonated through his ribs and rolled in great waves across his chest.

"No," he grit out. "No."

He could not, would not, spend another moment helpless this night.

Nikolai folded his arms. "Lie. Down," he ordered, unequivocally. "You're taking more painkillers and you're going to rest -- I'll even look the definition of that up for you, if you're

not familiar with it.” His voice gentled. “I’m not leaving tonight, Sasha.”

The subtext was all but audible. *I’m not leaving you alone.*

*Damn you. Damn you.* This time, when Aleksander closed his eyes, he hardly dared open them. There was a wet, aching pressure behind his lids, hollow and familiar, that went deep beyond the night’s events. Why, *why*, did Nikolai somehow manage to sound those lonely depths, as if he damned well knew they were there?

He felt the bed shift as Nikolai rose and a moment later the locks on the great arched doors clicked into place. Then the bed dipped again and the gentle weight of the covers settled over them both.

“Fine,” he groaned, as if he minded considerably more than he did. “Another morning of ‘oh yes, we happened to meet at dawn, purely by chance, of course’ won’t seem suspicious to anyone.”

He felt Nikolai prop himself up on one elbow. “Want me to go and mess up a guest bed? Tip a couple of bottles of kvass down the sink and leave the empties to be tripped over? Sing a few carousing songs while stomping my feet? I feel sure I can make enough noise for the both of us, if fooling a few servants means so much to you.”

*As if fooling the servants matters now.* Someone had spoken when they should not. Tomorrow, he would find out who, and deal with them.

*Those images though...* Aleksander swallowed a laugh before it hurt and slitted his eyes.

“What sort of noises? The kind you normally make would have us in all the more trouble, if my guards were not so discreet.”

*Do have us in trouble.*

Whether the King had done all he would over that little discovery remained to be seen. It would not be the first time the King had...appropriated...one of his sons’ lovers as his own. And that he would not permit. The consequences, the chaos that would ensure, the corruption of all his careful plans, the very idea itself, all made his stomach seize and start toward his throat. For a breath-stealing moment, he thought he might have to scramble to the bathroom. Then Nikolai was handing him the healer’s empty basin, guiding his hair out of his face, and all he had to worry about was the searing edges of his newly mended ribs, the slimy taste of regurgitated herring, and the bitter burn in the back of his throat.

“That,” Nikolai said dryly, whisking the basin away, “is not how you normally react to my noises.”

Aleksander swilled his mouth out with the glass of water someone, probably Nikolai, had set down on the bedside table. He spat back into it and set it aside, thumbing his lips several times to dry them.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer to leave?” he croaked, trying to summon back that flimsy shred of humour. “I am hardly my usual excellent company.”

“Correct me, if you must,” Nikolai called, disappearing into the bathroom to rinse out the basin and glass, and return with them. “But I think we’re rather a way past that, don’t you?”

Impossible. No, improbable. And yet, and yet... He settled for a tentative shake of his head.

“If I’d known you’ve a yen for playing the servant...”

Nikolai snorted and insinuated himself under the covers again, moulding himself against Aleksander’s uninjured ribs, tucking an arm into the least bruised valley above his hip, and deftly avoiding his aching ankle with his lanky legs.

“You wish.”

“I warned you, *sobachka*, I don’t wish. I make plans.”

Nikolai’s laugh was warm and oddly comforting, refusing and demanding nothing.

“Good campaigns are made better for a night’s sleep.”

Aleksander glared at him in the darkness as he felt the press of a thin vial into his palm.

“I shall ensure that,” he growled.

But he flicked the lid off the vial and lifted his head just enough to swallow the sleeping draught. The shadows drew him peacefully under soon after.

## Chapter 5

A thin shard of sunlight spitted the bed. Aleksander woke to the cacophony of his own heartbeat, a fog as thick as perfumed cloth swirling inside his throbbing skull, and starbursts of the past night's events strafing behind his eyes. Something moved by the windows, a shape shifting between the curtains, the flicker of gold. His power slammed through him like a thunderclap, plunging the room into blackness.

"Sasha!"

He barely deflected his shadow blade. There was a wet rip and one of the curtains collapsed, sliced off near the valance. Light flooded across the room. Nikolai stood half-naked, his ruined shirt slung over the back of a chair, pistols drawn but pointed to the ceiling, both hands up. The sun played mockingly over his signet rings.

Aleksander collapsed back against the pillows, covering his face with his hand. He didn't trust himself to school his expression. He heard Nikolai pocket his pistols and quietly retrace his steps towards the bed.

"Next time, I'll say 'good morning' before I get up," he said ruefully. "I was hoping you wouldn't wake yet."

"Next time," Aleksander muttered through his fingers, not pretending even to himself that there would be no version of a next time, "You could save us both a start and simply shoot me in my sleep."

The new mattress bowed as Nikolai eased himself onto the edge of it.

"You're not that old yet," he said, as if he presumed it was the truth.

He knew the tales of the near immortal Grisha as well as any in the Little Palace, had guessed how so many of their ends had come to be at their own hands. If he had ever wondered how many centuries lay behind Aleksander's seemingly youthful years, he'd never mentioned it.

"Today," Aleksander admitted, letting his hand fall, "I feel it."

Nikolai's fingers carded through his hair, as if searching for silver strands that weren't there.

"You've looked worse," he offered. "Although perhaps not since you got caught in the blast from that Fjerdan firestorm device during my third border campaign."

Those wounds had been honourable, at least, not foul and...furtive. His stomach cramped and -- Saints! -- if he was sick again so soon he was going to beat his own head against the stone basin. He was *not* this weak.

"An...insufficient excuse to skip...the breakfast hall, then," he managed, swallowing hard.

He could scarcely contemplate the rowdy room full of Etherialkai, Corporalkai, and Materialkai, a swarm of red, purple, and blue keftas, hundreds of voices all talking at once, tossing bread, clapping cups, and laughing. His people. His reason for every single slight he endured from this line of flimsy kings. He loved them all. But they were so loud. And they'd be eating that damned salted herring.

"Fortunately," Nikolai said, with a sharp-edged smile, "You are breakfasting with me this morning."

Provocative. Undoubtedly ill-advised. He tried to calculate how much he should care, but the thoughts kept skittering away into the lingering mists of the sleeping draft.

"Rest, Sasha," Nikolai murmured, before Aleksander realised his eyes were closing again. "I'll wake you in enough time to parade your new accessories wherever you please later on."

If Nikolai hadn't been touching him, Aleksander could have concealed his shudder. He felt Nikolai's hand tighten on his uninjured shoulder, before the welcome shadows swallowed him again.

\*

When he next woke it was late morning. Nikolai had juggled what was left of the other curtain over the glare from the terrace, but the light still striped the room, bald and bright and relentless. He knew, as soon as he opened his eyes, that the summons had come from the King.

"When?"

"A little over an hour. A luncheon meeting. My invite came separately, but it appears we -- you, me, Vasily, the King and Queen -- are to meet with all the senior advisors again."

Public. Pointed. Inevitable. He stared up at the cosmic artwork on the canopy overhead and nodded.

Nikolai rose from the wingback chair he'd been reading in and padded over, bringing with him a glass of hot sweet tea that he set in reach of Alexander's good arm.

"I can send for Genya, if you'd prefer a little less warpaint."

"No."

Let the King gloat at his handiwork. If he thought Aleksander cowed by such short-lived pains, he would not look for the subtle signs that paved the path to retribution. His Grisha, however, were another matter. They could not know. He was their protector. They must not see him brought low.

"Send for Zoya. Tell her I'll meet her by the lake shortly before the hour." Hissing through his teeth as every inch of his battered body protested, he prised himself upright. "And, if you don't mind..."

The prince was already opening the doors of the wardrobe.

"Don't tell anyone," he said lightly, "But I can button a shirt and even tie bootlaces myself."

\*

Twenty painful minutes later, Aleksander stood before the long mirror in his closet and sneered at his own reflection. Another dose of a potent analgesic Nikolai had procured from Saints-knew-where made it possible to keep his weight distributed, more or less evenly, through the soles of his long black leather boots. Deep charcoal breeches, belted more loosely than usual, stretched up to meet the tuck of his simple black shirt, itself hidden behind the crisp black silk of his tunic. Nikolai had, with a slight smile he'd refused to explain, chosen the one lined in crimson that showed only in flashes at the edges of the stiff collar and in a thin line between the military clasps that ran from throat to navel. His black kefta, this one ornately embroidered in bronze and silvers that swirled like tendrils of light-edged clouds eclipsing a sunlit sky, completed the outfit. He looked damaged, yes, but also dangerous.

"Not bad," he admitted, provided he ignored the livid red-purple of his blackened eyes and jaw, the knotted pink line of healing tissue bisecting his left eyebrow, the deep splice in his lower lip, and the taut, uncomfortable way he was holding himself. "Although I note you avoided any bootlaces after all."

Nikolai snorted and pulled on his own boots, eyeing him critically. "Could be better. You look like you spent several hours last night being introduced face first to a stone wall."

"Accurate," Aleksander pointed out, "Although it was a floor."

"I always thought folk-dances went better if you kept yourself upright."

He still wasn't quite asking. Aleksander's lip curled.

"Dancing with kings sometimes requires...improvisation."

Nikolai nodded soberly. He knew that well enough himself, Aleksander thought, though he doubted Nikolai had ever danced these particular steps with the man. He hoped not. He could sense Nikolai waiting, a silent offer to listen if he wanted to say more. He didn't. A glance at the time gave him an excuse to shake his head.

Nikolai took the cue and slipped on a shirt he'd liberated from Aleksander's closet, a soft loose-fitting cotton one in a shade of slate somewhere between deep grey and indigo, patterned in black brocade. The colour did not suit him and the fabric clung too tightly to the heavy muscle of his taller frame. He tugged at the hem, trying to get it to settle down over his belt, then abandoned it as a lost cause and slung his olive greatcoat over the top, buttoning it to mask the mismatch between his own brightly elegant tailoring and Aleksander's more sombre tastes.

"Ready to go again?" He frowned as Aleksander took an unsupported step, swore, and had to stand very still for a moment to recoup his breath. "How are you feeling?"

“Like I need a new dancing partner.”

Sharp, that, and tasteless, if not reckless too.

Nikolai’s hazel eyes studied him for a moment. Then, as if he were choosing to take that as a bitter jest, he said, “Don’t kill him, hmm? Not over lunch.”

“Hungry, are you?”

Safer ground, though the thought of food made bile rise in his throat. Fingers closed softly around his wrist, coaxing down the hand that had risen involuntarily to wipe his mouth.

"Not especially. But Vasily’s still in line to inherit."

Was that reckless? Or merely tasteless in turn? Contemplating the prince’s unreadable countenance, Aleksander decided to chuckle.

"Saints forbid. That man has two left feet." He reached out with his good hand and cupped Nikolai’s unshaven cheek. “You should go. This court needs no more gossip-fuel, and we’ve both neglected our duties long enough.”

Nikolai slipped his hand up to cup the back of Aleksander’s neck, his cool fingers soothing against the jarred and aching bones. Gently, but not so gently as to frustrate, he brought their lips together in a long, lingering kiss.

“‘Til tonight then.”

Aleksander sighed, resting their foreheads together for a moment before he stepped back.

“You might wish to distance yourself from me, for a while.”

Already, he could feel the first quakes of impending isolation, of internal exile, temporary disgrace, enough perhaps to be the ill-wind that whisked this fleeting thing of theirs away into another sad gulf in the yawning landscape of his past.

Nikolai canted an eyebrow at him.

“Not particularly,” he announced and, before Aleksander could tell him to think the better of it, he vanished out of the door.

\*

It took longer than Aleksander had planned to reach the clearing by the lakeside. His black stallion had carried him with as much patience as he could muster, but he was young, this one, and unsettled by his master’s unusually askew seat and one-handed direction on the reins. Walking had been out of the question. The stallion’s jog and anxious spooking had been little better, but it had covered the ground faster and he had very little time to keep this already precarious situation under control.

To his relief, the clearing was still empty. All the Grisha classes were held within the academy that morning and Zoya must still be in the training rooms with Botkin. Sliding awkwardly from the saddle, he tethered his horse a safe distance away and then limped back into the rough circle of trees.

Every step sent pain radiating from more places than he could keep track of, until his whole body throbbed like a spider's web of protesting neurones and spasming muscles. Even Nikolai's ferocious analgesic was barely enough to keep him putting one foot in front of the other. When his injured ankle rolled on a moss-covered stick, he crashed to his knees in the dirt of the forest floor. It had not been deliberate, but the sudden breath-snatching jolt, the engulfing agony, and the wave of dizziness that forced his eyes closed catalysed what he had meant to do. He let the flashback he'd been fighting to ignore all morning crash over him in gust of wet grass, the faintly salty taste of lake water air, and an unstoppable shudder. This time, when his power surged, he kept his fists open. A single twist of his wrists was enough. Shadows exploded outwards and a silent boom shook the forest to its roots.

When Zoya arrived a few moments later, he was sitting on the blackened trunk of a fallen tree in a charred ring where the clearing had once been. Swinging down from her dappled grey mare, she tied her mount a short distance from the Darkling's stallion, and picked her way carefully into the crater that had been blown into the forest floor. She paused to study the scorched earth, shorn canopy, and splintered trees. Then she pushed back her hood and approached, her polished cobalt boots stirring up little clouds of ash at each step.

"You wanted to see me, *moi soverennyi*?"

"Yes." His voice came as barren as the grey and lifeless shrubs at the edges of the blast radius. "I want you to drench this place in a rain that lands nowhere else, stir up the ruins with your winds that disturb nothing else, and strike a few places with lightning that no one sees. Do not break the boundaries of this clearing."

Zoya cocked her head, curiously, then looked down at the dust-darkened toes of her boots with a sigh.

"If I'd known you wanted me to make such a mess, I'd've changed my shoes."

He almost smiled. Vain, proud, fearless Zoya.

"This is no mess. We fought here last night." He glanced up and saw her intake of breath as she caught sight of his visible injuries. "These are your doing."

Her expression grew wary, unease lurking behind as she tried to decipher what blame she would be carrying. He did smile then, an effort that might have gone further if his lip had not started to bleed again.

"I'll walk the halls with them for a time, and you'll take the credit. You're the only one who is truly capable of such a feat."

"Not yet," Zoya corrected, but the brightening of her eyes betrayed that she recognised the compliment.



“Close enough.”

She nodded, as if she knew that was true. He’d trained her well, after all.

“I will do it.”

She did not ask for an explanation. She was already turning, assessing where his attack could have come from, picturing where she would land counter-strikes for maximum plausibility.

He stood carefully. Using his power had accelerated his own healing, enough that he could cross the clearing without her seeing him stumble.

“Regrettably, I cannot stay to watch. I will stop by again later to see what you have achieved.”

She nodded, fingers flexing. The air was growing heavy with moisture. His throat rebelled and he quickened his step. Zoya’s voice stalled him, briefly, with his hand on his stallion’s tether.

“One day, I would like to try this for real.”

“One day,” he agreed. “You will.”

Grateful that she kept her back turned, her attention already absorbed by her task, he used the ragged stump of a tree to claw his way back into his saddle and reined his stallion away towards the palace.

\*

The Queen gasped when the Darkling strode through the doors into the dining hall at the Grand Palace, late enough to be insolent.

Vasily sputtered wine onto his plate. "Saints, Darkling! What happened to your face?"

"A training exercise," the Darkling said smoothly. "Nothing of consequence."

He bowed briefly to both sovereigns and stalked over to the table to take his place.

"My dear fellow," the Queen breathed, leaning over to get a better look at him. "Let me call you my Tailor, if not a healer."

"Thank you, no. The victory was earned and should be seen to be so..." For the first time, he let himself look towards the King and he took a vicious pleasure in the way the man stiffened as he added, "...for now."

The King harrumphed and did not meet his eyes. His fingers had begun that pestilent twizzling at the stem of his half-empty wine glass.

“Not very seemly, Darkling,” he muttered, as though he had not damned well intended his wounded General to be seen, limping, bloodied, and preferably bowed. “Although...sets an

example, I suppose...”

“Quite a fine one,” agreed Antanov, who had left early the night before. “Always good for a leader to keep his hand in and let some of the finest recruits try theirs at a real challenge instead of simply drilling at home.”

He raised his glass to the Darkling with a smile.

The King coughed and gestured to a servant for a refill. Spots of colour were rising on his jowly cheeks.

For an instant, the Darkling wondered if the lung that had taken damage was collapsing inside his chest. A split-second later he recognised the breath-stopping, heart-crushing sensation swelling inside him as rage -- a rage so violent, so vast, that he could not speak. The King was embarrassed. The King! Somehow, that compounded the humiliation. Last night... it hadn't even been a planned punishment, a plot a while in the making to restore order to the tempestuous court, show his distaste for the entanglement with Nikolai, and take his General down a peg or two -- the latter a fate the Darkling might even own he had been courting. It was a...a drunken fumble in a fit of wine. The beating itself an afterthought to disguise the sheer small-minded folly of it.

Struggling to remember how to breathe around his fury, it took every single ounce of self-control the Darkling had not to blow the table apart and let the shadows take all. It was a show worthy of any he'd ever given at the winter fete when he managed to lift his wine cup in answer to the smiling captain and tear his eyes away from the King before he could snarl, *You could at least have the courage to own it!*

The tableau might have stalled there, suspended between crackling whipcords of tension, half the room alive to them, the other half gradually growing conscious and confused. But the doors flapped open and Nikolai entered. He was coiffed and smiling, seemingly oblivious to the ear-splitting silence. He'd changed his clothes and, apart from a faint set of shadows under his eyes, he had done a remarkably good job of concealing that he'd been up half the night and then nearly skewered at dawn.

At his arrival, the tension collapsed into a series of hale greetings. Nikolai easily identified everyone by name and began asking after wives and husbands, siblings and children, old injuries, and grumbling campaigns. Other talk hurriedly started up around him. By the time he slid into his seat between his mother and the Darkling, the trembling atmosphere was nearly gone.

“Saints,” he breathed, turning to the Darkling with his features carefully arranged, as if he were merely saying hello beneath the hubbub, “The only way I could have made this more awkward would have been if I walked in and kissed you.”

The suffocating wrath inside him popped like a child's balloon. A laugh rushed out of him and he had to raise his napkin hastily to hide it. Nikolai snuck an arm under the table, sought and squeezed his free hand.

“I might even be tempted to try it another time. It would certainly liven up the conversation.”

“You never know,” the Darkling murmured back, his eyes seeking out the flustered King as he contemplated it as a kind of revenge, “I might even let you.”

\*

The meal wore on much as Nikolai had expected after that. Idle chatter continued over the opening soup course and the fish had been served before matters started to turn towards business. Nikolai kept up his side of conversations with a little more artificial cheer than usual, making the most having been away to share tales of travel and jests that deflected attention from the nearly silent Darkling. He was never exactly chatty and every so often, Nikolai would catch wind of his cool, cutting tones responding to some enquiry or other, his composure immaculate. But a sidelong glance was enough to tell that his calm was balanced on a knife-edge. He'd hardly touched the food. The perspiration at his hairline, the slight tremor in his left hand, and the guarded way he was breathing all betrayed that the analgesic was fading, that he was struggling to keep up the charade.

A few seats away, the King was all but ignoring them both. When he did happen to look their way, his colour rose again, blotching his cheeks and neck all the way down to his collar. He knew, Nikolai realised, taking a bite out of his own tongue instead of the fish. He knew. That was going to make for an uncomfortable conversation later on. For all the King's own indiscretions, which had peppered the country with bastards, he was tetchy about who his sons were seen with, preferring Vasily's casual haunting of the whorehouses to the occasional relationships that Nikolai entertained. Given the political implications of this one, and the seeming warning the King had given him the day before, Nikolai knew he was in for an unpleasant afternoon. Trying, and failing to imagine the King also confronting the Darkling about it, Nikolai had to bite his tongue again, this time on a snicker. He leaned over to the Darkling to whisper,

“If you're still plotting murder, you might save yourself the effort. He looks fit to choke himself to death on his wine any moment.” The Darkling's napkin rose to hide another smile, before Nikolai added half to himself, “I've not seen him so abashed since mother caught him in bed with one of his mistresses.”

The napkin, which had started to lower, rose again. This time there was no smile. Only the bright bloom of blood against the hard, fervent press of the cloth. Nikolai's fork nearly fell to his plate as his chest seized like a Heartrender had reached inside and squeezed. *No, no, no. Father, you didn't?* Had last night been the King's confrontation of the Darkling? Should Nikolai be considering himself partly to blame for the Darkling's injuries? Remembering what the King had done before to the one and only lover of Vasily's who had been part of the court, before the King's rather more personal attentions disgraced her, made him go light-headed with horror. It was not the moment to pursue that runaway thought-horse. Wrestling for composure himself now, Nikolai let the Darkling choose to ignore him and forced his attention to the discussion of what additional protections Ravka might offer the new refugee Grisha from the North.

“*Moi tsarevich* -- Nikolai?” The smiley captain who Nikolai recognised as Dimitri Antanov, a man often stationed on the north-eastern border near Chernast, and to whom several people around the table had been complaining about a proposed increase in military presence there.

"What think you of our Darkling's demands that we increase our searches and our aid for Grisha refugees on the northern and southern borders?"

The Darkling's sudden stillness beside him forebode that this too was still part of the doomed dance from the previous night. Careful not to glance at him, not to give the slightest sign that his answer might not be his own, Nikolai answered honestly.

"Ravka is not wealthy, nor is she large, nor sufficiently armed to seek out war when we already have to fight merely to maintain our peace. It is questionable whether we have the resources to send more scouting parties, more troops, out to our borders. We give our own non-Grisha subjects little enough: training, a uniform and a gun, while we ask them to do ever more for their country. Our Grisha, we offer greater sanctuary in the Little Palace."

He paused, watching who was nodding and grinning with satisfaction, taking note of the names.

"But in essence we offer the Grisha the same. Training, uniforms, and to become living weapons, whom we draft alongside ordinary people to stand shoulder to shoulder against Ravka's enemies. They fight, and die, and bleed beside us ordinary soldiers just the same.

"Some may say, then, that we are doing enough. That we are treating our subjects fairly. I'm not sure that's true. While no one is safe in war, our Grisha are at more risk than the ordinary soldiers. Their range and power is greater so they are always on the frontlines. They are specifically targeted by our enemies simply because of what they are, and because they pose such a danger to those who do not use them. If captured, there is rarely any hope of ransom or recovery. They are burned, shot, tortured, murdered, or taken for experiments that offer a fate far worse than death. They face the same threats from war as our non-Grisha citizens and then more because the world sees them as something lesser, something to be hunted down and slain, for no better reason than that they are different.

"We have become a sanctuary land. We are seen by some of our fellow nations as more civilised than our enemies, because we embrace our Grisha while others shun theirs. It is a state of which the Lantsov line is proud."

Even Vasily was nodding now, drawing enough attention to himself with great sloppy gestures of his cup that he might later gain the credit for Nikolai's words. *Liar*, Nikolai thought sourly. *If you had your way you'd half the Grisha's resources and double their work.*

"We should do more for our Grisha because it is right, because we can -- because we strive to do better for all our people, and our Grisha are no exception. If you still question that, then surely you must acknowledge that, in aiding and welcoming Grisha expelled as enemies from the lands of those who call themselves our enemies, we make ourselves new and powerful friends. And, as always, we need all the friends we can get."

It was not half the speech he could have given, had he known the question might come. But it was enough. A chorus of agreement broke out around him. Almost all at the table were nodding, smiling. Even those still frowning were listening. Nikolai made a mental note against each of the faces, picking out those who had become uncomfortable, those who could not look at the Darkling.

The King was eyeing them both now thoughtfully. Nikolai wanted to slap the table in frustration. No wonder the Darkling's temper was so short that he'd upset the King last night. Nikolai dared not look at him either. The Darkling would be no less enraged for having had an *otkazat'sya* speak for him and be instantly heard. *You'll feed, water, train, and shelter them, but you won't treat them as human, will you, father?* Because they could survive some mortal wounds and often heal without scars, the Grisha were treated like guns or cavalry horses. As if such strengths somehow made them invulnerable. Nikolai had served on the frontlines long enough to know it was rarely the physical wounds that truly broke a soldier down.

"Thank you, Nikolai." Antanov seemed delighted with his answer. "I know you've fought in a few mixed units -- with some of our former refugees too, I believe. It's good to hear from one who has. Darkling, you have my support, if you need it."

As other officers and advisors echoed him, Nikolai mentally crossed Antanov off the list of questionables he was forming alongside those he was certain had stayed late in the throne room last night. Seven, so far. At least four guards. And his father. No wonder the Darkling was hurting.

"Darkling." The King cleared his throat abruptly. "I will speak with you later. I would hear these proposals of yours more fully. We may be able to stretch our budgets and resources a little further after all. Perhaps," he added, with an awkward cough, "After you've had time to clean up from your... training bout."

Did the shadows thicken below the table? When Nikolai risked a sidelong glance, the Darkling's face was impassive. A long moment of silence thundered through the room, making several people twitch in their chairs. Then the Darkling inclined his head and said only,

"Of course, *moi tsar*, at your majesty's...leisure."

\*

Back at the Little Palace, to which he had returned to interrogate his guards and servants before he met again with the King, Aleksander collapsed into a chair in his deserted war-room. He needed a moment -- maybe two -- to collect himself, to gulp down another painkiller, and try to recall why he ever put up with this pathetic, pantomime King. No sooner had he sunk his throbbing head into his hands than there was a knock on the door. His weary "come in" was answered by the same healer who had attended him the previous night.

"The King has bid me come to you," she said neutrally.

Aleksander managed not to glower at her. *You show me your contempt and then you cover it up with false mercy, moi tsar. Ignorant, vacillating fool of an otkazat'sya!* He was half minded to hurl the healer out of his chambers, send her packing back to the hospital wing, and let the King make what he would of it. But the fault was not hers, and he could not be sure the King would not take out his own shame on her. With a sigh, Aleksander waved her over, barely resisting the urge to simply pass out on the desk and be done with it.

"My thanks to you, Healer. Do as you see fit."

\*

Elsewhere in the Little Palace, lunch had also just finished. Gathering up her things to return, reluctantly, to the Grand Palace to assist the Queen in her preparations for the evening entertainment, Genya too was interrupted by a knock on her door. When she called for it to open, Zoya leaned indolently against the frame.

"You have seen the Darkling today."

It wasn't a question, so Genya did not answer, though her heart began to pound. The timing between her unfortunate discovery, the irascible reaction of the King when he'd forced it out of her, and the Darkling's mysterious injuries troubled her greatly. Were all those things connected? If so, did the Darkling know she had been the one to betray what had obviously been a very private secret? She dug her nails into her sweating palms.

"Well?" snapped Zoya, making it a question now.

"In passing only. H-has he sent for me?"

Zoya eyed her with the same perplexity she might have used for an earthworm making the same enquiry.

"I am not his messenger-girl!"

"Then why are you here?" Genya demanded, offended in turn. Zoya had hardly come to whisper and speculate, not with her at least.

Zoya tucked a sheaf of her loose black curls behind her ear, as if to deliberately show off her undeniably glorious good looks, expensive jewellery, and artful make-up.

"If anyone asks, you did an excellent job on *my* tailoring."

Genya stared at her, a hundred thoughts clamouring for attention. First: *are you sleeping with him too?* Second: *you wouldn't let me within a hundred yards of you, unless you were injured first and had no other possible choice.* Third: *Oh. But you weren't...and I didn't...* Finally, the wisest thing seemed merely to agree.

"I always do."

Relief washed over her as Zoya nodded, apparently satisfied, and stalked away.

Trembling, Genya sank down onto the edge of her bed, raking her hands through her hair until it spilled around her shoulders in a chestnut cloud; all her careful styling was ruined and would have to be redone. The liminal precarity of her position, caught between the two most powerful figures in Ravka, was never pleasant but today it was downright frightening. She felt like a pawn with no right moves to make.

Taking several deep breaths to steady herself, she shifted along the bed and settled before her mirror to restore her hair and make-up. She was glad Zoya had offered nothing in the way of explanation. The less she knew, the safer she hoped she'd be.

\*

Being in the room with the King, alone bar the Apparatus and a few uninvolved guards, had been harder than he'd anticipated. Every rustle of those perfumed clothes, every breath of his wine-sharpened sweat, every flash of his rings when his fingers drummed the table had made the Darkling's stomach curl and his throat clench. He would not, *would not*, show it, of course, would not let himself be distracted from his cause, but he was light-headed from the effort when he was finally freed into the twilight, a sheaf of signed documents with the orders, funds, and resources he'd wanted tucked safely into his pocket.

His horse seemed grateful that he was no longer riding like a sack of spoiled potatoes as they departed again for the Little Palace, and looked on idly when Aleksander half fell out of his saddle the moment they reached the woods to vomit into the bushes. Leaning against a gnarled yew, wretchedly wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he stroked the stallion's velvet nose and cursed his own fragility. Despite his carefully cultivated appearances, he was not immune to shock, grief, hurt, despair, or any other emotions he'd long ago taught himself to corral and confine to cages where they might be released only to be used as needed. But to find his locks so friable was a surprise he did not savour. Such a little thing, so petty, how could it have rattled him to his core?

Distracted, he hardly noticed what he was doing until his horse halted again outside his mother's home. Even then he might have ridden on, had her boy not been out on the steps playing a tin whistle to the crickets. Before he could open his mouth, Misha had scrambled to his feet and dashed inside to alert her. Stripping out of his cloak and tunic, folding them over his saddle, Aleksander tethered his horse and ducked into the low-slung house.

The door had been open less than a second before the familiar bark rang out.

"Come in, boy, come in! You're letting all the hot air out."

He stepped inside and closed the door, spent a moment relearning how to breathe in the broiling gloom. Baghra was sitting in her armchair by the blazing fireside, layers of multicoloured quilts draped over her lap as she sipped from a glass of warmed kvass.

"Well?" she demanded, her suspicious grey eyes scouring his countenance. "What are you bothering me for this time?"

He shook his head, hardly sure himself, and took the seat opposite her.

"Can a son not simply visit his own mother?"

She scoffed. "You never just visit me. You always want something. More knowledge. More power. More, more, more!"

She banged the earthen floor with her cane.

It was an old refrain, half complaint, half command. Leaning back in his seat, imagining himself far away from the palaces in any of the many secret shelters they had once called home and marvelling at the absurdity of his nostalgia for a time when they had been hunted like wolves, he protested.

“I want nothing for myself. I came to see if you needed anything.”

Her cane cracked across his left knee. The new shock of pain through the recently healed joint made him gasp. His mother cackled at him.

“I see. I see. Crossed the King again, did you? You’ll never put right that Fold of yours if you keep antagonising the Lantsov line. D’you want to send us both into hiding again until our faces are forgotten? Waste another century or so in exile? Your promise to protect our people won’t mean much then.”

How did she always know when he’d made a mistake? Aleksander rubbed the smarting stripe on his leg and studied her. And what had he expected but her castigation? She’d known little comfort herself as a child. He knew better than to expect her to offer any to the boy he’d been or the man he was. He squared his shoulders. He would not let any more Grisha down. No matter what it took.

No matter if the King was not yet finished with him over Nikolai.

The cane poked at him again, finding the raw muscles between his mended ribs.

“You’re shaking. Bad this time, was it?” There was something akin to concern in her voice. “Silly boy. You look fine to me. You still hold command of the Second Army?” When he nodded, she grunted in relief. “That’s all right then. You mustn’t let him get at you; give him no way to get in. Here.” She shunted the bottle of kvass across to him. “Drink some of that. You’ll heal soon. He’ll forget sooner. So, time passes swiftly and our purpose stands.”

She didn’t know. How could he want from her what she had no idea he needed? What she’d never been able to give? He accepted the drink, made some vague noise of agreement, and let her distract him with her usual complaints about the latest crop of students.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Aleksander stepped out of his mother's cottage into the long shadows of late evening, one of Nikolai's servants was waiting for him. She held a note bearing the prince's seal in her hand. They had not spoken after the midday meal. Only the briefest brush of Nikolai's hand down Aleksander's back as the meeting disbanded had marked their parting, as though he had guessed it was taking everything Aleksander had by then to stay standing.

He took the missive and cracked the red wax with his thumbnail, not sure what he would find, since he'd heard word that the King and youngest prince had been cloistered in the King's study since he left. He could well imagine the direction of that conversation and he half-expected Nikolai might have decided some distance would be wisest after all. But the script in Nikolai's impeccable penmanship simply read, *Dine with me tonight*.

He thought about refusing, if only because he knew, with Nikolai, that he could. He was still so very deeply tired. But if the prince had been in for a talking to of his own, he might be making a final point to the King. And, if he were honest with himself, he wanted to feel Nikolai's hand smoothing through his hair again, a strong arm around his shoulders, keeping him steady and still in the lamplight. He needed that mind like a whetstone he could hone his own thoughts into something more rational against, that heart like a compass to recalibrate his desires away from a too-personal bloody revenge and keep his ambitions intact. Nodding his thanks to the servant, he remounted his weary horse and turned back once more for the Grand Palace.

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"You've demanded my company three nights in a row, and breakfast this morning? People will think you're plotting world domination now too."

Nikolai smiled and closed the book he was reading as Aleksander was ushered into his suite.

"Let them," he said airily, waiting for the door to close before he stood, drew Aleksander into his arms and simply held him. "People like me enough that they might start cheering me on."

They might, too, though Aleksander was still unclear whether the prince had any serious plans to lay waste to those between him and the throne. Pity. If he didn't, Aleksander might be forced to take it himself, and Nikolai was shaping up to be a man he thought he might follow.

"Supper is laid," Nikolai said, his fingers scratching lightly over Aleksander's scalp where he'd laid his head on the prince's shoulder. "Come, you need to eat something. You look fit to fall flat on your poor face."

Aleksander thought of the papers tucked safely inside his breast pocket, bearing the King's seal. *I have what I need.* But he didn't move. Nikolai kissed his temple, tightened his hold for a moment.

"Come," he urged again. "I have no plans tonight, nothing bar some sustenance and more sleep."

Aleksander drew back, frowning at him. Why had that sounded so much like reassurance? *Saints tell me, please, that you do not know the whole story, Niko.* It was one thing for the prince to think his father a weak king with no head for strategy and petulant fool minded to meddle in his son's affairs, another to realise he was a rapist. He doubted very much that their strange understanding would survive such a conflict of allegiance.

"Are you sure?" he drawled, as if he were deeply disappointed. "There are hours until dawn. Unless you have a ten-course feast piled up next door, even you, my *otkazat'sya*, cannot need that much sleep."

Nikolai cradled the side of his face, the side that didn't still faintly ache, in his palm. He twirled his fingertips through a stray lock of dark hair and gave it a gentle tug.

"Rare as it is for me to say no to you in this -- and I'm not, if that's what you want -- I suspect it is not what you truly need."

Aleksander considered pushing the point, as much to himself as to the prince. But before he could speak, a yawn betrayed him.

"Perhaps not," he owned. "Come on then, *sobachka*, or should that be mother-hen? I'd welcome a decent whiskey."

"Bleurgh," Nikolai complained, leading the way into his dining room and heading over to a carved walnut sideboard beneath a sprawling painting of West Ravka's coast and ocean to fill their glasses. "Have I still not convinced you of the superiority of brandy?"

He unstopped a bottle of particularly fine whiskey and poured it out nonetheless, repeated the act with one of brandy, and returned to the table. Handing the whiskey over, he clinked their glasses as he had done the previous night and sipped. Aleksander toasted him in turn, before turning an uninterested eye to the food. Nikolai seemed to have forgone the formalities of the traditional three courses. Instead he had laid on what was essentially a picnic. There were little morsels of sweets and savouries, so that it was possible to reach for dough-wrapped sausages and *shaslik* alongside sugar pastries and cherry *pirozkh*i. These were scattered amidst more substantial dishes, several soups and stroganoffs and, he looked hastily away, cuts of onion and that salted herring he thought he might never eat again.

"I'm surprised you didn't go all in and meet me with a blanket and a basket under the stars," he said, trying to meet Nikolai's attempted levity with his own.

Hazel eyes twinkled at him. "I would, if I thought you'd come."

Aleksander half-huffed, half-laughed. “Cliche, *sobachka*, cliche. My tastes are rather more refined than that these days.”

“I know,” Nikolai sighed, helping himself to the sour-cream soup. “I shall have to up my game. Perhaps take to the skies and set out a feast while we fly over the ocean.”

He nodded toward the painting of West Ravka, where sunlight danced on the water, the Unsea mercifully somewhere behind the artist’s point of view.

“Are you planning to harness a volcra? It wouldn’t surprise me to find you’d managed to wrangle them into a training programme to maximise Ravka’s aerial firepower.”

“It’s a good idea,” Nikolai said, giving it rather more consideration than it deserved. “If you’ve any thoughts on how to stop them ripping off their trainer’s head first?”

“Sadly, no. They may be my...one of my grandfather’s creatures, but their darkness does not seem to appreciate mine.”

“Shame.”

Aleksander hummed an agreement and, aware that Nikolai kept glancing at his empty plate, reached for a bagel and began to pull pieces off it.

“Speaking of firepower,” Nikolai said after a moment, “Did you convince my father to enhance the protections for the refugee Grisha?”

Aleksander arched his brows. “Do you doubt me?”

Nikolai snorted. “Good,” he said, with feeling. “We should talk about the Fold again, as well. You’ve heard we lost another skiff yesterday -- on a supply run!”

“I did. Though I don’t know what you want me to say. You know the nature of the power I command. I can only make the Fold bigger; I cannot close it. We’d need a sun-summoner.”

Nikolai’s glance at the portrait again was rueful. “How often do they come around?”

“Not thus far, in my lifetime.”

“Training programme for the volcra it is, then.”

Nikolai sighed and Aleksander offered,

“I’ll speak with the Materialkai. There are...accounts of a kind of liquid fire created once before.”

“Your ancestor -- Morozova’s work?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t he destroy those blueprints?”

Nikolai knew more of this than he should. Morozova's journals had been in safekeeping for a very long time; they were ostensibly long lost. Aleksander masked the surprise that tried to creep into his voice.

"Yes. The compound was violently unstable -- more devastating than those firestorm devices even the Fjerdans have abandoned as causing too much collateral."

"Oh, this sounds like a much better idea than the volcra training school..."

"Morozova was one man, with limited resources. This is an academy of extraordinary people and a reasonably robust R&D budget to match. The Fabrikators may be able to concoct a usable version. If so, it would reduce the risks to our Inferni and Squallers and everyone who travels across the Fold."

Nikolai was looking intrigued now. "It couldn't be used on those wooden skiffs. Maybe carbon-fibre? Or glass?"

"Good point." Aleksander watched as Nikolai pushed his forgotten plate of stroganoff to one side, leaned back in his chair to grab a sketchbook off the dresser behind him, and began to sketch rapidly.

"Tubes here, here, here," he said, his scribbles indicating the very bones of the boat, its prow, numerous points on its mast and boom. "Just enough accelerant to light it, use the motion of the ship to keep it circulating, and it could well work."

*What have you been studying?* Politics and economics were certainly not it. *And how do you know your way so well around a ship?* He had the kind of confidence with the structures and capabilities that could only come from having crewed one. Aleksander could not have done it. Fascinated, he leaned over for a closer look.

"Yes, yes -- keep talking."

This was more like it. This -- this probable bastard son -- embodied every reason he still allowed himself to serve the Lantsov line. This kind of commitment to the kingdom, the resources he commanded, the principles that drove him. They were each like a flint to the other, sparking off idea after idea to make the realm stronger, safer, to make it not simply survive but flourish. Hours disappeared into page after page of diagrams and jotted discussions for self-illuminating skiffs and skycrafts, strategies for smarter crossings of the Unsea, and more suitable splicing and shoring up of strained resources nearest the battle fronts.

\*

The moon had begun her descent towards the horizon when they finally paused for breath and what Nikolai decided to call a very belated nightcap.

"I should go," Aleksander sighed, leaning back in the aquamarine wing-chair he'd commandeered in the sitting room. "Dawn can't be more than a few hours away."

"Two," Nikolai agreed. "We've got maybe three before our respective people start knocking for us." He rose and padded barefoot over to perch on the arm of the Aleksander's chair, stroking his hand through the jet-dark hair. "Don't go. Come to bed with me. Otherwise, I've entirely failed in my intent to make sure you get some sleep."

"We did more useful work there than I've done in months of damned circular meetings," Aleksander said, bitterness creeping into his voice. "The day before yesterday's included."

"The King can be ponderous," Nikolai sighed, fingers still smoothing through Aleksander's hair. "He gets there in the end but..." He trailed a fingertip down Aleksander's nose, mapping the places where his bruises had been. "What he did to you was wrong."

Aleksander stiffened and his hand came up to drag, hard, across his lips. The suspicion Nikolai had felt at the council meeting grew. Did he know the half of it? *No*, he thought, when Aleksander abruptly pulled away and stood, as if he were allergic to Nikolai's sympathy. *Almost certainly not.*

"Enough. I must go. It was nothing, nothing that matters. I'm no longer injured and you need not play the nursemaid. I am fine. I can ill-afford to--"

"Take comfort from a friend?"

*Fall apart.* The words hung between them, unacknowledged, since they both knew how unlikely it would be that he truly would.

"I need to--"

Aleksander stirred, restless, as if the carpet were suddenly on fire. The excitement stirred up by their plans was still coursing through him, combined with the unnamed tension that seemed to be driving him to breaking point. His scarcely contained energy rekindled Nikolai's own, sending him to his feet. It had been this, this passion, this intense need to do something, to defend Ravka, to survive and fight for the survival of their people, this cock-eyed and often dirty brand of mutual heroism that had crashed them into each other for the first time years ago. He didn't seem to know where to put it now, and Nikolai dreaded discovering that what had once been so easy between them might have changed.

"Kiss me," he said, careful not to make it a demand. "You need to kiss me."

Aleksander turned and did just that, his arms twisting almost angrily around Nikolai's neck. He felt, for an instant, as if he were being held by a python, who might just revel in his warmth or might on a whim choke him to death instead.

When Aleksander drew back, he was as restive as before. He went over toward the sideboard, as if he thought to pour himself another drink. But he abandoned the glass there and walked a little way back, before he turned towards the door, then back to the sideboard again. It took a moment of repeating the motions for Nikolai to realise he was pacing. Aleksander never paced. He prowled, he stalked, he stormed, he stole, but his movements were always as calculated as his stillness. This directionlessness was unheard of.

“Your father,” he spat, as if a cauldron inside him was suddenly boiling over, “is impossible! He sits on his hands and prevaricates over everything! I used to tell myself, once, that it was wisdom, that he was merely gathering all possible intelligence to make an informed decision. Strategic. Careful. Active. He doesn’t. His mind changes every time the wind blows. Someone sneezes in Novyi Zem and he thinks again. He wants me to act, yet he forces me to dither alongside him.

“I’ve had countless years of strategic experience. I’ve led the Second Army into every campaign that has ever been, and directed the First as well. I’m his principal military advisor and he turns to me for every single step of every manoeuvre we make, military and political. Yet still I always find myself forced to explain my plans twice -- nay, thrice! -- as carefully as the greenest lieutenant, argue thrice as hard for any funding, beg and crawl to be heard in a roomful of my inferiors simply because I am Grisha!” He hesitated, then added, “There may, I’ll concede, be some prejudice overhanging from the crimes of my great-great-great grandfather, but it’s not merely campaigns where the Fold is involved. It’s every damned time.”

Nikolai had settled himself behind the wing-chair, out of the way enough that Aleksander could pace. He folded his arms on its back and nodded.

“I’ve seen. I’ve heard.”

“He can scarcely put on his damned socks without me, but he trusts me less than a horse near an open grain bag. Do you know his first words to me in private today were, ‘Did you put him up to that?’ Because you had the nerve to agree with me!”

“He asked me that too.”

Aleksander stopped long enough to sneer. “But he believed *your* answer.”

Nikolai did not try to deny it. He turned the brandy glass he retrieved slowly between thumb and forefinger. Aleksander’s anger would have hit the stratosphere if he’d known that the prince had been forced to convince the King that, no, it would not be wise for him to assume command of the Second Army, that an ordinary soldier -- even a prince -- could not so successfully lead Grisha warriors as a Grisha commander. That it would not be politik for him to assume Aleksander’s place, even in name alone, when Vasily was heir to the throne. That it would hardly be a just reward for the Darkling’s unflinching, lifelong service. He had not mentioned that such an act would be tantamount to a declaration of war between the King and his General, a war that the King could not win. And he was sure, though he’d spared his father this as well, that the nameless understanding between them would not survive if Aleksander had to kneel to him too.

“This is what came to a head two nights ago, isn’t it?” Nikolai asked instead.

“I stepped on his carpet,” Aleksander snarled, starting to pace again in that thoroughly uncharacteristic fashion. “I was making a point and I overstepped the edge and--” He came so suddenly and completely to a standstill it was as if he had never moved at all. “He didn’t even hear me,” he said, more quietly, something bleak and hopeless passing across his face. “All he saw was a threat that wasn’t there.”

Nikolai could well believe it. The threat was *always* there, was Aleksander himself. He was in so many ways far better equipped to rule Ravka than the man he served. *Not better than me, perhaps, but certainly better than my poor fool of a father.* Aleksander, whatever his intentions -- and Nikolai was not always certain he knew what those might be -- made little show of concealing it either. Though whether he'd have been so bold, so insistent, if his expertise were always given its due was likewise in question.

"So he had his guards put you to the floor," Nikolai ventured, convinced there had to be more to it than that and wondering what fight Aleksander had first put up -- though since the throne room still stood and no mourners filled the halls, no doubt much less than he could.

"His guards, his other generals." Aleksander shook his head disgustedly. "I'm *Second Army*, don't forget. When it suits him, he can make me subservient not just to him but the whole damned *otkazat'sya* lot of them."

Nikolai let slide the fact that he too was *otkazat'sya*, and he would prefer not to be damned if it was all the same. He opened his mouth to ask how the generals had been drawn in, but paused, frowning, as Aleksander lifted his hand and, for what seemed like the hundredth time in the last few days, drew it shakily across his mouth. Thinking of the blood blooming brightly on the napkin, Nikolai stood and crossed to him, taking Aleksander's now tightly crossed forearms in both hands. Feeling him tense, he thought the better of it and loosened his grip.

Gently, he pressed, "There's more, isn't there?"

Aleksander raised a haughty brow. "Is this not enough?"

"You keep doing this..." Nikolai lifted his hand, mirrored Aleksander's unconscious swipe-swipe-swipe of his thumb over his lips.

Aleksander snatched his hand down, his expression blanking immediately. It was answer enough. He seemed to see that realisation in Nikolai's eyes, because he hissed,

"You relentless, prying son of a--*why* have me tell you what you already know?"

"I don't know, Sasha," Nikolai said swiftly, well aware he could make an enemy of this man now with a single misspoken word. "I've seen enough of the world to suspect, but I wasn't there and I have heard nothing you have not thus far told me yourself. I don't *know*."

Voice as void of emotion as he could make it, Aleksander spelled it out to him. "Now, you do."

Nikolai sat down heavily on the arm of the chair. He took a long, hard pull and drained his glass of brandy.

"Damnit," he said under his breath. "Damnit to the ends of the earth."

Then he stood again, took Aleksander's hands in both of his and gripped them as if he might never let go. Looking fearlessly into grey eyes that burned like molten rocks, he said,

"Sasha, I am so, *so* sorry. There are no circumstances under which you could ever have deserved that."

\*

Twelve people knew. Nikolai made it thirteen. Aleksander's rage was a vicious thing, fangs and claws raking his insides at the insufferable, insidious injustice of it. He'd thought it would be quick, this cruelty, and to the King it had been. But this was different than the punishments he'd suffered before. So small, so petty a thing, yet the aftermath sprawled endlessly before him, a relentless wondering at who would find out next, who else, and when, where and how it would chip away at his fabled self-control, his mastery of the Second Army, his place beside the throne, his promise to his people.

Yanking away from Nikolai's comforting hold, he snapped, "That's it? You find it so easy to believe your father is capable of this?"

"My father?" Nikolai might call him that, but it was a topic he swerved past, as always. "Let's just say I have my suspicions about the King's relationship with Genya Safin."

*So do I.* It was not a fate he'd intended to inflict on the young tailor when he'd first sent her into the palace to spy as a child. Nor yet could he prove it, though if she were half the Fabrikator he thought she were, she might not need him to. Grimly, he registered who was most likely to have been forced to betray them. There was no chance that she did not know of their relationship. He toyed with how he might punish her, and whether he could do worse than to leave her to what she already suffered.

"I have no proof from her, or from him," Nikolai went on. "But this--"

"This is not proof, Nikolai. This is my word against the King's."

The word of an ambitious Grisha. A most implausible claim to topple a sovereign, and one that could do him no favours to declare. Nikolai shifted restively.

"And those who are friends with that floor? I suppose they saw nothing."

"They were First Army leaders. Well chosen."

Not all of them hated the Grisha but there were enough, certainly enough who envied Aleksander and would gladly see him fall. The King knew who was who.

Nikolai exhaled hard, frustrated. "This is not something I can just forget I know. The King must be held accountable for this."

"It cannot not be done."

"It must. He has broken Ravka's laws. He may currently make them, but he is not above them!"

Aleksander closed his eyes, willing Nikolai to listen as he usually did. "*Moi tsarevich*, no. I have given up my right to refuse once this week. Please do not ask me to do it again so soon."



Nikolai reared back as if he'd been slapped. "Sasha. Shadowheart. I won't act without your consent. I hear your no. I accept it. But I will ask for it again one day."

Relief made his head spin. He had to put a hand out, steady himself against the sideboard. "One day, I will give you it. But not today."

Nikolai sighed. He put his elbows on the back of the wing chair again and buried his head in his hands, raking his fingers through his blond hair until it flared out in a tousled halo. He looked very tired, and suddenly very young. His idealism, his faith in laws, his belief that he could always make everything right, were simultaneously naive and endearing. He'd planned to leave, but now Aleksander went over to him and wrapped his arms around Nikolai's waist, kissing the side of his face.

"Patience, princeling. There will always be time for revenge."

Nikolai grimaced. "I'd prefer justice, if it's all the same to you. I'd rather not see what you'd like to do to him."

Aleksander allowed himself a very dark chuckle. "Always such a pure-heart. You should relax a little, let yourself maim someone once in a while. It's very refreshing."

Nikolai's hands hid whatever expression crossed his face, but a ribbon of tension sang through him, like the idea was hardly strange to him, and again Aleksander wondered, *where do you go when you're supposed to be at school?*

"If I leave this room right now, I just might," Nikolai admitted. "Will you stay, Sasha? Please. I don't trust either one of us alone right now."

Interesting. More interesting that he thought they might be more trustworthy together. Aleksander had never thought of himself as any kind of touchstone to hold back someone else's darkness.

"Will we stand here until dawn then?"

It could hardly be far away. He could already hear the faint sounds of the nightlife settling down, making space for the pause before the morning chorus.

Nikolai shook his head, almost sheepishly. "I don't know what else to do. I'd like to lie down, to hold you, but I'm half-afraid I might try to 'fix' you. Isn't that absurd?"

Aleksander turned it over, strumming his fingers up and down Nikolai's ribs. He'd had plenty of practice shutting away centuries of horrors that might otherwise have brought him howling to his knees, and from which he might never have got up.

"No," he decided. "For many it might be too much, too soon, but...I do not need 'fixing,' Niko. This has not broken me."

His fingers explored the buttons of Nikolai's shirt, trailed across the sleek skin and hard muscle of his abdomen. Nikolai inhaled. Cautiously, as if he were still waiting for Aleksander to recoil, he leaned back into the embrace. When Aleksander simply pulled him closer,

Nikolai relaxed and turned his head for a kiss, letting Aleksander control the speed, the depth, the intensity behind it. Bit by bit, they worked their way into Nikolai's bedroom, until they tumbled, entangled, across his white satin sheets.

\*

In the pale pink half-light that peered through the drapes around Nikolai's bed they lay quietly, sweat cooling on their skin. The faint chatter of birdsong had begun. Tracing a cluster of silvery scars on Nikolai's side, Aleksander was aware of a deep sadness beginning to rise in him, as if from the bottom of an old and polluted well. Such a little thing, so small, and yet even now it was haunting him. It had been a shot fired, wild and aimless, by a man who barely knew the right way up to hold a gun. But it had struck something, made him realise there was a hole in his defences, something that could be struck again and again until it made him falter.

Nikolai touched his cheek.

"You're tense," he murmured, and Aleksander cursed himself for a traitor. "Was it too soon after all?"

Aleksander sighed, let his gaze stray around the room. A room that had become a space of sanctuary, like none he'd ever had. If he did not tear it down, someone else soon would and he did not have the luxury of weakness.

When he answered, his voice sounded distant and so weary he knew he was scarcely masking his regret.

"What your father did...it would not have mattered so much if I were still of the age to bed anyone who would have me. What is one more sacrifice for Ravka, after all? But..I'm not. I don't often have time, now, or inclination, for..." His fingers trailed thoughtfully up Nikolai's bare arm, "This. And so I find it..." His throat clicked as he considered, and discarded, a number of words, settled for, "Disturbing."

Behind one confession was another, the closest thing to an acknowledgement of the truth between them. Nikolai lifted one of Aleksander's deft hands to his mouth and kissed the knuckles, lingering on the one which bore the ring that marked the Darkling's allegiance to Ravka.

"This," he said, in a similarly guarded tone, as though he were suddenly having doubts, "is not the same."

"No doubt the rumour-mongers will say so. After all, a man keeps his weapons close, does he not? He doesn't pass them around amongst friends and family like a common--"

Nikolai pressed a finger to his lips. "Without you, Ravka would not still be independent. When the wine is not thinking for him, the King knows that."

*The King fears that, Aleksander corrected silently. My mistake was to remind him that I know it too.*

Enemies were poised on every frontier. The constant dither and delay frayed at the options to keep Ravka safe like knives sawing against ropes. How many had been severed already? How soon did the crown need to pass again, before he would have to take drastic action to shore up their position to protect his Grisha? Would Nikolai move to keep that crown from passing to hands as inept as his father's? He did not ask, even the thoughts themselves were treason. While he might conscience becoming history's villain again if the need arose, Nikolai still preferred the hero's guise.

*Sobachka, if you were king, I might yet simply follow. But I cannot wait for you.*

Dawn was rising now, the light against the window blossoming into oranges and yellows.

"I must go." He slipped out of Nikolai's arms and bent to kiss him, knowing it might be for the last time.

Nikolai was dozing, watching through eyes that kept trying to close as Aleksander stepped into his clothes, shutting himself away in his military black. The prince touched his fingers to his lips, blowing him another kiss, but Aleksander did not catch it. He turned to go, then, at the door, turned back.

"Niko?"

"Hmm?"

"Shadowheart?"

A sleepy chuckle. "Well, you're not exactly sweet."

Despite his swelling sadness, Aleksander smiled. Then he walked out into the corridor and closed the door.

As he crossed the grounds towards the Little Palace, he realised that the dandelion clocks were over.

\*\*\*

*One year later...*

Rain drummed on the windows and roofs of the Little Palace, rattled on the woodland trees, pounded on the canopies of the Summoners' Pavilions. Inside what had once been the Darkling's war room, Alina Starkov fretted with the antler collar around her throat and grimly studied the recent death lists from their enemy's civil campaign.

"These are odd," she said, pushing the paper towards Nikolai, who had been moving pieces around the three-dimensional map on the table, trying to plot the Darkling's forces according to his intelligence networks. "He's run a series of attacks on First Army encampments. They look incredibly specific. They're localised and there aren't many casualties except in the upper ranks. He's mostly left the First Army alone up until now, when we haven't been using them against him, that is. They look completely random to me."

It had been a long time since Nikolai had felt he'd known the Darkling, if he'd ever known him at all. It seemed improbable now that he had once sat in this room, with its glorious old maps, drinking kvass at this same ebony table and laughing with the man who would now see the Sun-Summoner enslaved, the Fold expanded to swallow anyone from anywhere who resisted him, and the whole Lantsov line, him included, in the ground.

He took the papers, but said, "I don't consider it a personal talent of mine to decode the manoeuvres of a madman, so I may be no help here."

"Is he mad?" Alina asked, her dark eyes serious and anxious under the brilliant light of the chandelier. She turned the sea-whip scale bracelet around her skinny wrist. "I thought-- I don't know..."

*She loved him, Nikolai thought bleakly, and he manipulated her. Did he do anything less to me?* He examined the paper she'd given him and only practice kept his expression from changing. The pattern did look random, until he registered the names of the commanding officers. Seven officers. He added them to the names of the four guards, two of them Heartrenders, that had been killed when the Darkling abandoned the palace. There had been others, many others, but these were indeed specific. Eleven names in total. Every single one he had expected.

"Who's to say how his mind works?" he lied, pushing the paper back to Alina. "I'll make some enquiries, but nothing jumps out."

She nodded and believed him. Under the table, Nikolai dug his fingernails into his palms. He knew now when the Darkling had given up waiting for the power on the throne to change. The message was as clear as if his former lover had spoken to him.

*Eleven down; two to go.*

[END]

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for the lovely comments and kudos! Thank you for coming along for the ride. For those who have enjoyed it, I have a sequel in the works: Alliance of Enemies. I'll be back as soon as I can.

Works inspired by this one

[Restricted Work] by [inahandfulofdust](#)

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